University of Alberta

Reporting and Communication Structure of a Large School District

by

Lorne E. Parker

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Abstract

The Edmonton Public School Board (EPSB) district communication structure appears to occupy a unique position within the school district governance realm, unique in the sense that principals, in their role as senior leaders, report directly to the superintendent. While educational researchers have increasingly recognized the important role communication structures play in terms of ensuring organizational effectiveness, no purposeful agenda exists for defining and assessing competence within this context. Given the apparent uniqueness of EPSB's communication structure, coupled with the need for further research in this area, the overall purpose of this study was to examine in detail the structure of reporting and communication between individual principals and the superintendent.

Data for this study were collected through the distribution of a questionnaire (Appendix A), followed by a series of semi-structured open-ended interviews involving 12 serving principals. Where required, follow-up interviews were conducted to clarify and expand on responses provided.

By design, the study was focused and direct, restricted solely to an examination of principals' satisfaction levels with the communication link between them and the superintendent. The major contributions of this study are as follows:

1. The findings support prior research that indicates that the lack of clear communication on organizational roles and responsibilities can create issues of role ambiguity and, in the process, heighten levels of dissatisfaction.
2. Principals who operate within a flattened governance structure have specific expectations for imposed communication processes. High levels of

dissatisfaction, resulting in lower commitment to organizational goals, occur when principals perceive that their communication needs are not being met.

3. The study provides specific implications for school districts that are considering moving to a flattened governance structure. Flattened school district hierarchies, by definition, presuppose a desire to place principals in a more direct operational line to the superintendent. In that regard, districts contemplating a move to a flattened organizational structure must strategically and clearly define reporting relationships and expectations for both principals and the superintendent. More specifically, implemented communication processes must be designed to facilitate that relationship by providing frequent opportunities for the parties to engage in direct two-way communication.

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Properly acknowledging all the people who shared in the completion of this dissertation cannot be accomplished in the space allotted. Nonetheless, I do want to formally thank several of the people who have greatly assisted me over the past few years.

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To my colleagues, Shannon Gentilini and Jamie Pallett specifically, I want to thank you for serving as my sounding board on numerous occasions, for helping me clarify my understanding of the data and its implications for my study, and certainly not the least, for encouraging me to see this project through to a successful completion. Words cannot adequately express how much I appreciate your willingness to accompany me on this journey. To my other colleagues, thank you for so willingly agreeing to participate in this study. I very much appreciated your patience, especially when I returned to clarify responses on more than one occasion.

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CHAPTER 1

ORGANIZATIONAL REPORTING & COMMUNICATION

Basis for the Study

During 25 years of service as a professional educator in two provinces and one territory, I have served as an administrator at the high school, junior high, and elementary levels in three school jurisdictions. School governance and communication between district officials and school-based administrators in two of those jurisdictions replicated the more traditional models found in most jurisdictions throughout North America—traditional in the sense that administrative staff consisted of a superintendent, an assistant superintendent, core curriculum consultants, and ancillary support personnel.

The lines of communication in those districts, as illustrated in the organizational structure of the Calgary Board of Education (Figure 1), followed the more traditional practice of principals reporting to a superintendent through an assistant superintendent. In the example provided, although not clearly evident in the line diagram, the format for district communications included a provision for the superintendent to have direct access to principals and for principals to directly access the superintendent if required. However, formal, functional, directive, and reporting communication occurred through the deputy chief superintendent of schools.

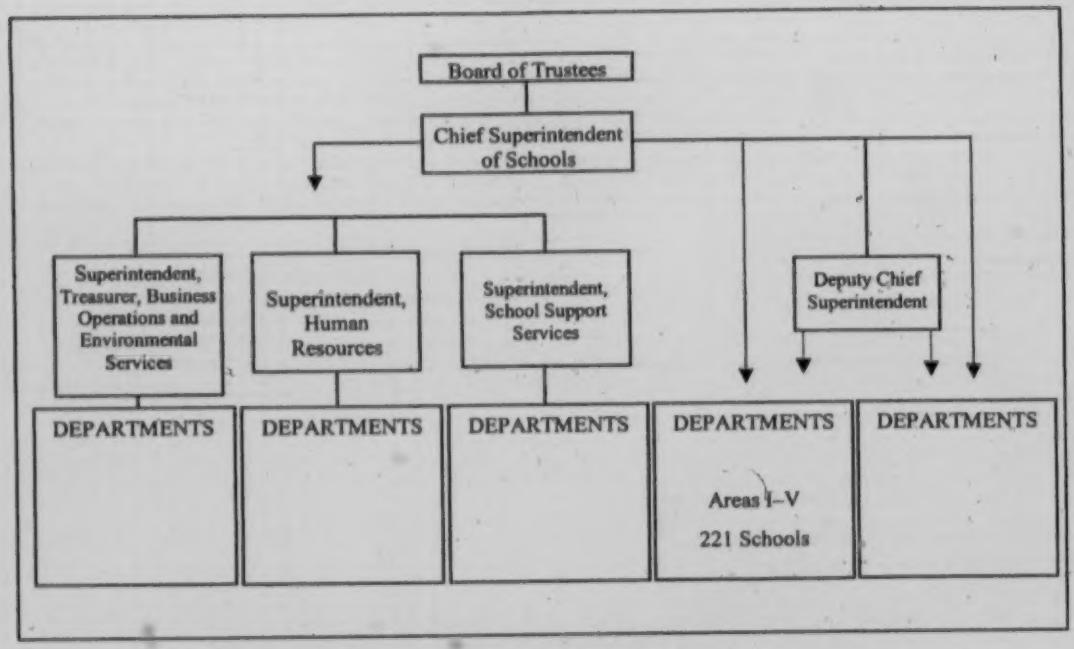

Figure 1. Traditional urban school board governance structure (Calgary Board of Education, 2006; used with permission).

Theoretically, the governance structure of the Edmonton Public School Board (EPSB), as it related to the reporting relationship between principals and the superintendent (Figure 2), was different from the more traditional governance structures. EPSB principals who operate using a site-based decision-making model were identified as *senior staff* and in this capacity report directly to the superintendent. Within this structure, according to district language and personal knowledge, EPSB principals were theoretically provided with greater decision-making latitude yet, reporting directly to the superintendent, were held to a high degree of direct centralized accountability. Although this structure identifies direct line reporting as a key organizational process, it is important to note that principals generally believed that there was some level of reporting to executive directors, in spite of district language to the contrary.

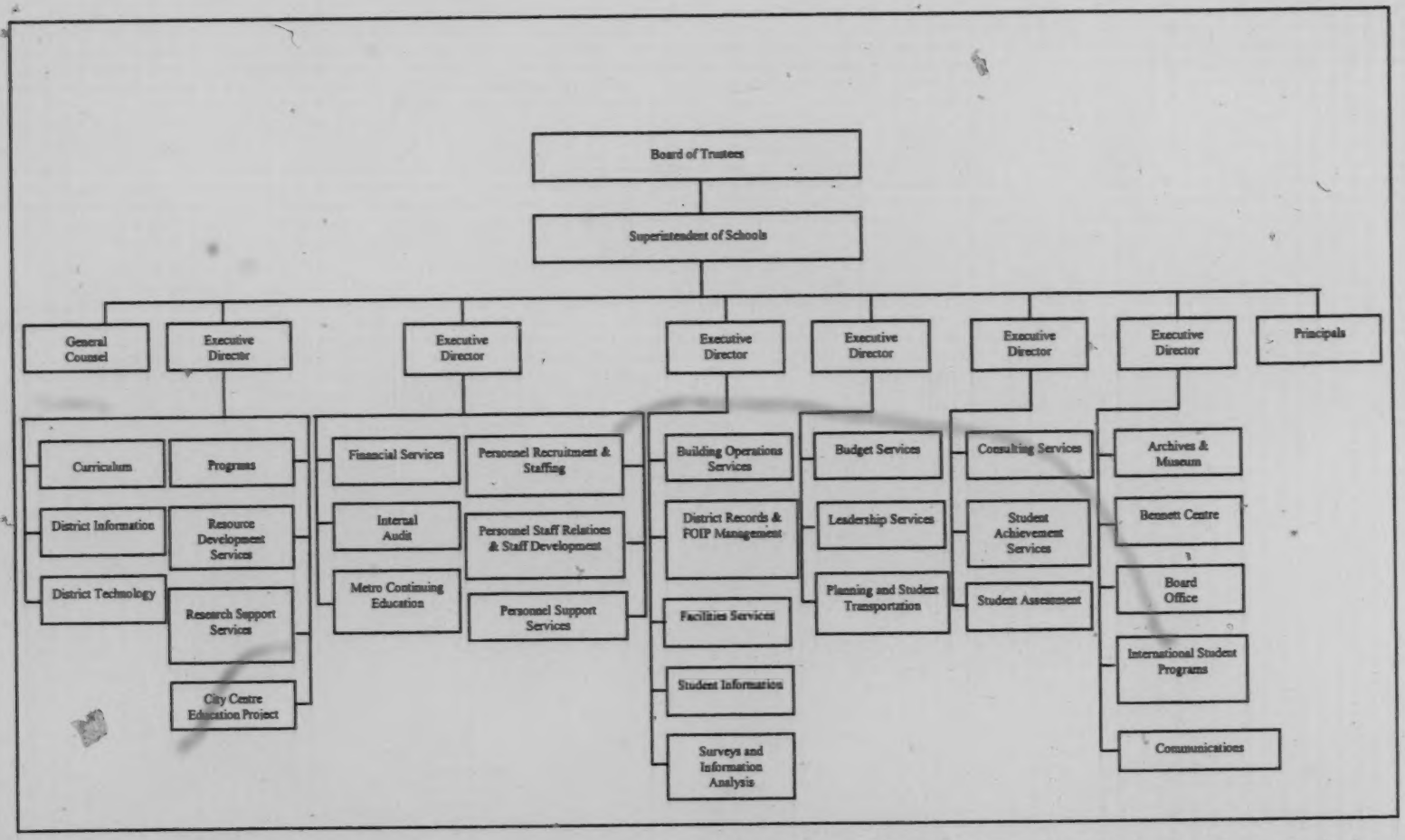

Figure 2. Edmonton Public School Board governance structure. (Edmonton Public School Board, 2006; used with permission).

With respect to district communications specifically, throughout my service as a professional educator I have experienced a variety of district governance structures and imposed communication processes. Personal experience with a variety of styles, procedures, and formats leaves an impression that certain aspects of district communication structures are more effective than others in the sense that district communication structures directly support and enhance work at the school level or serve as a distraction.

Colleagues have affirmed this belief in that they frequently express high degrees of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with communication processes surrounding their role as school-based administrators. The perception of an increased level of criticism directed at the lack of effective communication in school districts appears to be evident in an era in which educators are focusing substantially more effort on building collaborative relationships through open communication links (Fullan, 2001).

The literature that examined effective schools, and, more specifically, the role of school districts in terms of developing and sustaining effective schools, frequently mentioned the important function of communication in the process (Kowalski, 2005). In spite of the frequent references, there continues to be little research specifically focused on district communication structures. This lack of focus, coupled with a personal belief that the success or failure of schools is inextricably tied to issues related to communication, led to this study.

Purpose of the Study

The focus of this study was an examination of the reporting and communication structure between individual principals and the superintendent. More specifically, the overall purpose of the study was to determine (a) how satisfied principals in Edmonton

Public School District were with the structure of the communication between them and the superintendent and (b) whether modifications might be incorporated to make the system more effective.

The unique history of the EPSB governance structure, coupled with recent developments involving the Alberta government, combined to make this study timely and relevant to current practice. More specifically, I believe that the results significantly add to the body of knowledge surrounding communication structures in school districts generally. An examination of the literature on this topic revealed limited focus in this particular area of study.

Significance of the Study

Internal satisfaction surveys are often used to examine the effectiveness of an organization's communication structure, albeit in a limited manner (Gonring, 1999). However, information collected specifically related to the communication processes is rarely examined in sufficient detail to provide the diagnostic information necessary to improve structures or encourage stakeholders to accept accountability for their roles in the process. Furthermore, Gonring argued, "Many organizations historically have treated internal communications as an afterthought; employees are a low priority audience" (p. 3). Although he was referring to business-based organizations, I posit that the concern applies equally to educational structures.

As this relates to EPSB, the district appears to enjoy a unique position within the educational governance realm in the sense that principals as members of senior staff report directly to the superintendent. In this context I observed communication processes within EPSB over the past five years. These observations became even more interesting when the Alberta government (Alberta Learning, 2003), in response to the district's

public request for increased funding, decided to examine EPSB's financial accountability processes through an external audit.

In an apparent reference to the EPSB governance structure specifically, the auditors pondered whether "the superintendent can effectively monitor the operations of 208 schools and hold accountable the 208 principals that report to him" (p. 10). In a summary of the report they suggested:

> The review team is of the view that there may be a need to further restore at least some assistance to the superintendent that was removed when the six area superintendent positions were essentially abolished, and that portion of system administration absorbed into school administration. (p. 10)

In a published response to the Minister of Learning regarding the auditor's operational review of EPSB, district officials (Alberta Learning, 2003) stated, "there were sufficient support structures in place to ensure the superintendent was receiving all relevant information necessary to operate the district in a timely and informed manner" (p. 2). At the same time, EPSB officials, in an apparent response to concerns raised in the 2003 audit, agreed to add "two more support positions to the superintendent's office commencing with the 2003–04 school year" (p. 2). Although this statement garnered only a few lines in the response, the effects of that decision opened a new chapter in the district's governance and communication structure.

Given the contextual nature of this research—the examination of communication within a purportedly flattened governance structure—I deemed it necessary to preface the study with a chronological history of EPSB, because the rich history of the district governance structure has undoubtedly framed and influenced the current communication structure. The following information is a combination of personal knowledge, information gained through a review of descriptive documents with regard to the

organizational structure of EPSB, conversations with long-term employees, and a review of an *Edmonton Journal* (Staples, 2003) article that was based on extensive interviews with two superintendents who substantially influenced EPSB's move to a flattened governance structure.

History of Edmonton Public School Board's Governance Structure

EPSB, with 203 schools and approximately 81,000 students, qualifies to fit into the large urban school district category. The district is currently the second largest school jurisdiction in Alberta and fifth overall in Canada.

Prior to 1972, the EPSB central office structure closely replicated the private sector model, which typically employs familiar concepts of line and staff authority to describe positions and relationships within the chain of command. Central office staff related to schools through a top-down hierarchy in which communication was direct and people were told what to do (Conley, 1993).

During the 1970s, changes to the governance and reporting structures were occurring in many organizations, both public and private. Radical new ideas such as decentralized decision making, worker participation in the decision-making process, and defined procedures for gathering input on all aspects of an organization's operations were being implemented. It was within this context that the seeds of the EPSB school governance revolution were sown (Staples, 2003) with the appointment of Mike Strembitsky to the position of superintendent in 1972. Strembitsky believed that "the system he inherited was bogged down with bureaucratic red tape and internal feuding" (Staples, 2003, p. 6). According to Strembitsky (Staples, 2003), "The system he inherited was in serious danger of 'becoming completely constipated" (p. 6).

Staples (2003) reported that "the basic premise of the so-called Strembitsky revolution was to flip the power structure of the school system upside down. . . . Instead of central office telling parents where their kids would go to school, the parents would tell the schools" (p. 6). Implementing this first stage of the revolution was a pragmatic approach to a significant problem. Strembitsky assumed leadership of the district at a point when the student population of Edmonton was growing at a phenomenal rate and district schools were not able to absorb this rapid growth (Staples, 2003).

Strembitsky's response to this problem was the introduction of "open boundaries" (Staples, 2003, p. 7). During the mid 1970s, Edmonton was experiencing an economic boom that resulted in rapid population growth in the city as a whole. However, much of that growth in terms of impact on schools was occurring in subdivisions located on the outer boundaries of the city. At the same time, "school enrolment in the older areas of the city was steadily declining" (p. 7). The move to open boundaries in 1974 significantly changed the way that principals viewed student recruitment, and by extension, communication structures, not only at the district level, but also at the school level (Staples, 2003).

Prior to open boundaries, schools were automatically populated by designated feeder schools that operated within very clearly defined attendance areas. Under the open-boundary policy, principals now had to pay more attention to the important role of communication in determining whether or not as organizations their schools would be deemed successful, particularly in the area of attracting students, who were now offered an array of choices, to their respective schools (Catto, 2003). The next plank in the so-called Strembitsky Revolution was the implementation of school-based budgeting.

School-Based Budgeting

In December 1979 Strembitsky introduced school-based budgeting (Catto, 2003). Following a motion of support for school-based budgeting, Strembitsky directed Allan Parry, a systems planner, to "radically change the way business was conducted in EPSB" (Staples, 2003, p. 7). Specifically, Strembitsky's direction was, "You blaze the trail, I will provide cover" (p. 7).

The philosophical underpinning of the structural shift was a belief that schools were in a better position to determine how actual dollars might be spent in the district. The change in budgeting from central office to schools reflected Strembitsky's philosophical position that he was "the superintendent of schools, not the superintendent of central services. I do not mandate the process, I mandate the results" (Staples, 2003, p. 7).

Following a successful pilot experience with seven schools, the district implemented school-based budgeting district wide. Teacher support for site-based decision making "according to a poll conducted by the Alberta Teacher's Association (Edmonton Local) in 1979 indicated they were less than supportive" (Staples, 2003, p. 8). However, the structure gradually gained acceptance, and in 1985 "a survey of 1000 EPSB teachers and principals showed the majority of teachers and an overwhelming majority of principals would recommend school-based budgeting to other jurisdictions" (p. 8). The revolution did not end with the introduction of school-based budgeting. In 1974, changing district demographics and external influences created the context for the next plank in the revolution.

Concern With Charter School Initiatives

Initially implemented in 1974, alternative programming was a district attempt to encourage students to attend older, inner-city schools by offering a small number of alternative programs at those schools (Staples, 2003, p. 7). The introduction of alternative programming served two strategic purposes. First, it allowed parents who preferred to send their children to a specific program—available only within a private system at that time—the same programming within a public system. Second, by strategically placing the programs in schools with declining enrolment, the district was able to creatively resolve issues related to space utilization (Staples, 2003).

The decision to offer a wide variety of alternative programming within a public system became even more important as the political attitude toward charter schools began to shift. During the early 1990s the Provincial Government was considering providing some funding to charter schools—a move that public school officials considered a serious threat to the public system. Public school officials feared that the introduction of charter schools would decrease enrolment in the public system and thereby reduce their funding. The provincial climate of the day proved to be the catalyst for the next plank in the EPSB revolution (Staples, 2003).

The EPSB response, according to Staples (2003), "was to thwart charter and private schools by refusing to rent any space to a charter school and encouraging parents, who wanted to start charter schools, to set up alternative programs within Edmonton Public" (p. 7). "Emery Dosdall, who succeeded Strembitsky as superintendent in 1994, made it his goal that every Edmonton child should attend a public school" (p. 7). The final plank in the revolution that commenced during Strembitsky's period of leadership was the introduction of decentralized decision making.

Central Office Restructuring

School-based budgeting, better known as *site-based management*, along with all of the other initiatives that Strembitsky introduced during his tenure, revolutionized the way that business was done at the school level (Young, 2001). According to Young, Emery Dosdall, who was appointed superintendent in 1994, "stoked it up several notches, eliminating nine associate superintendents in the central office, bringing more than 200 principals directly under his watch" (p. 3).

As illustrated in Figure 3, associate superintendents were replaced with assistants to the superintendent (executive directors) and placed in a reporting role at the same organizational level as principals. The ultimate goal of the new organizational structure was to improve communication flow between the superintendent and the principals and, as a consequence, eliminate much of the "red tape" that Dosdall believed was inhibiting critical and timely decision making throughout the organization (Young, 2001).

Dosdall further believed, as did Strembitsky, that "the trappings of central office bureaucracy were negatively influencing school-based administrators' ability to make the kind of decision that would positively influence student achievement and overall district operation" (Young , 2001, p. 3). Dosdall explained his position regarding the positive outcome of the new governance model: "It is impossible for one superintendent to have as much presence at the schools as nine associate superintendents; principals have to step up and make a lot more decisions" (p. 4).

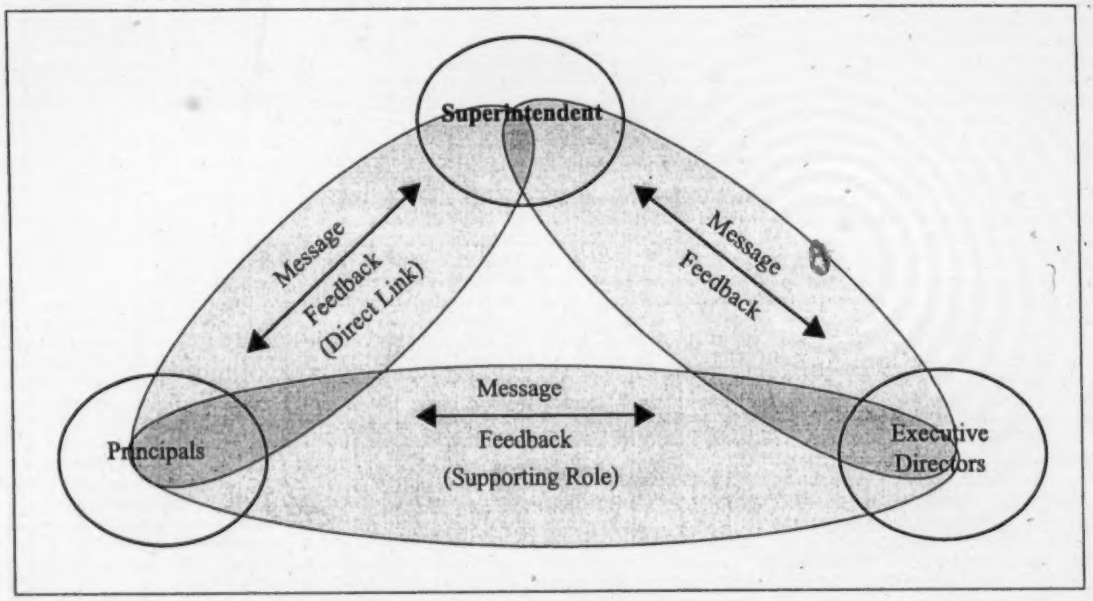

Figure 3. EPSB reporting/communication structure.

Ouichi (2004), in an examination of the removal of the associate superintendent level, observed that Dosdall

> altered the structure of the school district by having all principals report directly to him. As a result, his central-office staff has learned a new culture in which the principals are to be respected and served—in part because they have a direct line to their boss. (p. 5)

The implication was that principals, and their requests as school-based leaders, had to be taken more seriously because they were now on equal footing with other senior district administrators.

Theoretical District Communication Structure

With the implementation of the new structure, according to McBeath (2001), "school agenda items finally begin to reach the superintendent's table on a regular basis"

(p. 7). He also observed that "many of these concerns had never reached the superintendent when principals reported to associate superintendents" (p. 7).

The issues that principals brought forth "focused on the number of district rules and processes that were getting in the way, the inadequacy of funding for primary students and the need to tailor some central services more closely to school needs" (McBeath, 2001, p. 7). The district response was to "create a unit called Leadership Services, a cost-recovery section, to help principals work on service issues, mediation, crisis intervention, expulsions and suspensions" (p. 7).

One EPSB principal positively reviewed the change in reporting structure: "This is a great model. I don't think anyone would consider going back to a centrally run system" (Young, 2001, p. 3). Several professional articles that examined the EPSB governance model in some detail suggested that district principals generally shared this sentiment (Conley, 1993; McBeath, 2001; Ouichi, 2004).

Although the foregoing relates more specifically to the organizational aspects of the emerging EPSB governance structure, the next section explores how these changes influenced the district communication structure.

EPSB Superintendent Advisory Structure

In recognition of the real and perceived difficulties inherent in a system that provided for direct communication between over 200 principals and one superintendent, Dosdall established a principal advisory committee known as the Superintendent's Council. Principal's appointments to the council, which comprised 13 principals who represented zone support groups, were for one-year terms. The council members attended monthly board meetings and met twice per month with the superintendent and two

Central Services Department heads to discuss issues that were affecting schools. They also provided feedback to the superintendent on district initiatives.

During the late 1990s school districts in the United States were experiencing serious difficulty in attracting qualified candidates to principal vacancies (Young, 2001). In 1998, according to Young, "a survey of 403 districts by Educational Research Services indicated the majority of school districts nationally were experiencing serious problems with attracting qualified candidates for principal vacancies" (p. 8). That same year, "EPSB attracted approximately 100 applicants for 25 vacancies, 55 of those applications from people outside the district" (p. 8). June 2000 brought about another significant change in district leadership when Emery Dosdall accepted the position of deputy minister of education in British Columbia and was replaced by Angus McBeath, an internal candidate.

At the beginning of his term McBeath publicly affirmed the reporting structure that his predecessors had implemented:

> We had a long-serving superintendent, Dr. Strembitsky, who had sufficient tenure that he was able to manage the change process politically, year after year, until it was so integrated into the system that when he left, his successors were not able to, nor inclined to dismantle what had become a fundamental operating system in the district. The benefits were so widely distributed in the minds of principals and parents and teachers and others that there was no appetite to change the basic operating system. (Ouichi, 2004, p. 35)

Within this context Superintendent McBeath began his term in office.

From 2000 to 2003, the governance structure that Dosdall implemented during his tenure remained relatively intact. Reporting lines—with principals reporting directly to the superintendent—remained stable, and responsibility for central office supervision remained primarily in the hands of the two directors. However, the decision to leave the

reporting lines intact came under external scrutiny with the release of the Alberta Learning (2003) audit report.

Alberta Learning Audit

The beginning of the 2003–2004 school year brought about a number of changes. Alberta Learning (2003) decided, in an apparent response to the EPSB's public request to the minister for increased funding, to examine EPSB's finances through an external audit. In the follow-up report the auditors recommended that "there may be a need to further restore at least some assistance to the superintendent that was removed when the six area superintendent positions were essentially abolished, and that portion of system administration absorbed into school administration" (p. 10).

In response to that recommendation, Superintendent McBeath expanded the role of assistants to the superintendent by appointing two additional principals to his senior staff. As of September 2004, senior staff, in addition to the superintendent, consisted of two executive directors, an executive assistant to the superintendent, and three assistants to the superintendent. The two directors were responsible primarily for central services and district operations. The executive assistant to the superintendent was responsible for all matters related to trustees as well as some central office supervisory responsibilities.

The responsibilities of the three assistants to the superintendent were associated primarily with supporting schools directly. However, they shared some of the responsibility for supervising central office functions. With respect to school responsibilities, the superintendent made it very clear to the principals that the role of the assistants was one of support rather than reporting. Each of the assistants was assigned approximately 60 schools, and in this capacity they met regularly with the principals to

discuss issues of support. Within this reporting structure, principals were still considered senior staff and, as a result, continued to report directly to the superintendent.

As I alluded to earlier, the flattening of the district governance structure resulted in the implementation of a communication structure designed specifically to serve the unique needs of the EPSB context. Although I acknowledge that governance structures and communication structures are inextricably connected, I designed this study specifically to examine principals' perceptions of the effectiveness of a district's communication processes. Within this context I examine EPSB's communication structure.

EPSB Communication Structure

There is an assumption that principals use a variety of methods to contact the superintendent. However, the intent of this study was to examine not only the media used, but also the perceived effectiveness of the imposed communication structure and processes. The media that the superintendent uses to communicate with principals, in addition to personal contact, e-mail, and telephone, take the following forms.

Superintendent's Educational Leadership Team (SELT)

On the first Wednesday of each month during the school year, all principals gather at the Centre for Education for a half-day Superintendent's Educational Leadership Team (SELT) meeting. The format for this meeting includes a general address by the superintendent to all principals in McCauley Chambers, followed by break-out support group sessions that are generally led by the support group representatives who are currently serving on the Superintendent's Council.

Principal Support Groups

Principals in EPSB belong to 1 of 13 support groups. The support groups, who meet a minimum of once per month, are organized by division within specific geographic regions. The mandate of these groups is, as the name implies, to provide collegial support in areas related to professional development and issues specific to their division and region. Additionally, the support groups provide feedback on district issues and initiatives to the superintendent through their representatives on the Superintendent's Council.

Superintendent's Council

Superintendent McBeath also maintained the Superintendent's Council structure that Superintendent Strembitsky had introduced. The council consisted of one representative from each of the principal support groups. Council members, appointed by the superintendent for one-year terms of office, met twice per month to discuss district issues and policies and provide feedback on pending district initiatives. In addition to the council members, the group includes the superintendent, two directors, three assistants to the superintendent, and the executive assistant to the superintendent. Members of the council were expected to attend monthly board meetings and other district events as requested by the superintendent.

Superintendent's Memorandum

The superintendent communicates with all EPSB staff through the weekly Superintendent's Memorandum. The memo, distributed electronically and available on the district Web site, is sent to all schools each Friday afternoon throughout the school year. In addition to the superintendent's messages, a variety of district organizations use

the memorandum to communicate specific information that the communication staff consider of importance to the majority, if not all, of the district personnel.

Additional Communication Media

Additional communication devices, such as a bimonthly newsletter called *The Compass* and a quarterly newsletter called *The Keynote*, are used to spotlight district initiatives that involve district staff members. Although they are used primarily to showcase school-based successes, the superintendent uses these newsletters to acknowledge staff successes in a public forum. Both *The Compass* and *The Keynote* are made available electronically to the public through the district Web site and in hard copy.

Although internal communication was the focus of this study, it is important to acknowledge the district's external communication structure because the external environment undoubtedly influences internal processes in some fashion.

Current External EPSB Communication Structures

A review of district expenditures revealed that $1,667,484.00 was dedicated to communication during the 2003–2004 school year (J. Pallett, personal communication, September, 2004). A closer examination of those expenditures shows that, in a clearly defined way, EPSB's communication structure was not restricted solely to communicating with district personnel. The expenditure patterns suggest an increased focus on both internal and external communications that replicate similar patterns found in organizations generally. This increased focus on district communications was further solidified with the establishment of a decision unit specifically dedicated to communication in 1995.

Understanding of Terminology

Communication

According to Goldhaber, Yates, Porter, and Lesniak (1978), *communication* is "the process of creating and exchanging messages within a network of interdependent relationships to cope with environmental uncertainties" (p. 1). Hoy and Miskel (2004) described the process as "complex, subtle, ubiquitous and important; it permeates every aspect of school life" (p. 341). Knudson and Wood (1998), in a specific reference to communication within a school district setting, defined communication as "the language, actions and processes used by the district to create common understanding between people in order to accomplish intended outcomes" (p. 30).

Communication Structure

Defleur, Kearney, and Plax (1993), described a *communication structure* as a "relational process during which source individuals initiate messages using symbols, signs, and contextual cues to express meaning by transmitting information in ways so that similar understandings are constructed by the receiving individual or individual(s)" (p. 11). Hoy and Miskel (2004) further stated, "Communication occurs within the structure when a sender encodes a message with certain intentions and transmits it by some channel to a receiver who then decodes the message and provides feedback to the original sender" (p. 342).

Executive Directors

EPSB executive directors, formerly referred to as *assistants to the superintendent*, serve in an operational role at the senior administrative level. Their duties include a responsibility for district operations and the provision of direct support to principals.

Site- (School-) Based Decision Making

School-based decision making, according to Alberta Education (1995), "is a process through which major decisions are made at the school level about policies, instructional programs and services, and how funds are allocated to them" (p. 13).

Organization of the Dissertation

For clarity of presentation, this dissertation is organized in the following manner: Chapter 1 has introduced the aim of the study and provided relevant information related to the research questions, purpose of the study, context of the study and definitions. The study is significant in that it contributes to our understanding of the important role of district communication structures in terms of enhancing overall organizational effectiveness.

The remainder of the dissertation is organized in the following manner: (a) Chapter 2 contains an examination of the literature relevant to organizational structures and communication processes, (b) Chapter 3 includes a detailed presentation of the research design, including the research methodology, questionnaire construction, interview format, data collection processes, data analysis procedures, and format used to report the results, (c) Chapter 4 presents a detailed summary of the data collected in the questionnaires, (d) Chapter 5 is a detailed summary of the data collected during the interviews, (e) Chapter 6 presents an overview of the study, identification and discussion of major findings, and specific recommendations for the organizational structure studied, and (f) Chapter 7 presents the implications for organizations that are considering moving to a flattened organizational structure, considerations for future research, and personal reflection on the perceptions I developed during the research process.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter examines the influence of communication structures within an organizational context and discusses the conceptual bases for the study. More specifically, it (a) justifies the research problem, (b) examines related research and theory, and (c) identifies gaps in existing knowledge.

Human Communication

Communication, whether it occurs for personal or organizational purposes, is at its route a very human process (Defleur, Kearney, and Plax, 1993). According to Defleur et al. (1993), "Communication is a truly remarkable process. Clearly, the most complex form of behavior in which we engage; it sharply separates us from other members of the animal kingdom" (p. 6). Furthermore, "No field of study has more important implications for our lives in contemporary society than that which looks systematically at the process of human communication" (p. 7).

The value of interpersonal communications, according to Nelson and Quick (1997), "cannot be replaced by the advances in information technology and data management that have taken place over the past several decades" (p. 222). Although considerable research has focused on the technical aspects of communication within a structural context, Neher (1997) argued that "the social patterns and networks that we call organizations are possible only through human communications; thus human organizations and communications are inextricably linked" (p. 1). At the same time, he acknowledged the importance of situating the study of communication effectiveness within an organizational context:

> The primary way in which people bring cooperative efforts to bear for solving problems and meeting basic needs. We are born into a world of organizations, and most of us can survive only in and through the reliance on humanly created organizations. (p. 1)

Although researchers devoted to this particular area of study appear to agree that organizations and human communications are inextricably linked, that agreement has not translated into more focused study (Conrath, 1973; Mintzberg, 1979). Following an extensive review of the literature on communication flow and organizational structures, Mintzberg (1979) concluded, "numerous concepts of organizational structure can be found in the literature; . . . unfortunately, few of these can be related to properties of communication, in no cases was the communications data used directly to evidence properties of structure" (p. 12). Mintzberg, referring to Conrath's literature review, suggested, "unfortunately, conclusions drawn from the limited data available are often applied to whole organizations when they clearly apply only to parts" (p. 12).

In a similar discussion on the lack of attention to this area, Conran (1989) observed, "In general, communications with those close at hand and those with whom we communicate most frequently will receive the least consideration as to how the communication occurs and its impact" (p. 156). Unfortunately, as D'Aprix (1996) argued, "what often passes as good communication is actually top-down reporting of organizational actions or events" (p. 5). In many organizations, little effort is expended to facilitate effective and meaningful two-way interaction between managers and their subordinates. Rather, the communications processes are more commonly designed to provide employees with very specific information that will allow them to respond to a given set of circumstances or specific situations in a structured manner (Argenti, 2007).

Organizational Communication

Organizational communication, according to Goldhaber, Yates and Porter (1978), is "the process of creating and exchanging messages within a network of interdependent relationships to cope with environmental uncertainties" (p. 1). Hoy and Miskel (2004) described the process within an educational context as "complex, subtle, ubiquitous and important; it permeates every aspect of school life" (p. 341). In an additional reference to communication within a school district setting specifically, Knudson and Wood (1998) defined *communication* as "the language, actions and processes used by the district to create common understanding between people in order to accomplish intended outcomes" (p. 30). It is within this understanding of communication that this study is situated.

Although this study was an examination of satisfaction levels with an imposed communication structure within a purportedly flattened governance structure, an understanding of the environment within which this structure operates must also be acknowledged. Not unlike other organizations of a similar nature, the district under study was engaged in a period of prolonged change, not only in leadership, but also in pedagogical approaches and practices. In accord with the literature on change processes generally, there appeared to be general recognition that communication plays a major role in the change process. Fullan (2001) posited that organizations generally accept that system leaders involved in any change process "must communicate, communicate, communicate. Lots of interaction is required" (p. 90). Yet, whereas proponents of change appear to understand the value of communicating generally, their understanding of the types and level of communication required for the participants to feel fully informed and engaged as the changes unfold appears to be more limited (Argenti, 2007).

Although change was not the focus of this study, the influence of change on perceptions of communication effectiveness cannot be ignored. Modern organizations, according to Neher (1997), "must constantly balance the need to adapt to change and accommodate internal diversity with the need to simultaneously maintain some stable order, without which they would not remain what we call organizations" (p. 2). Howard and Geist (as cited in Neher, 1997) also argued that, "while it remains crucial for the organization to maintain a high degree of stability, it must simultaneously foster an acceptance of, if not a bias for, change to be successful in today's economic environment" (p. 2). Change represents the desire of organizations to continually respond to constantly evolving environments, both internally and externally, to remain in a positively responsive position (Jones, George, & Fane, 2005).

Educational institutions are also affected by a constantly changing environment and must continually strive to achieve an appropriate balance between stability and adaptation. Fullan (1991) described change within an educational context as "a process of coming to grips with the multiple realities of people who are the main participants in implementing change" (p. 95). Much of the literature on the development and sustainment of effective educational organizations acknowledged the important role of central office communication in this process. However, few educational researchers have examined in any detail the specific role of communication structures and processes in terms of ensuring that the outcome of a change initiative is positive (J. H. Berg, 1995). This lack of attention, according to Goldsmith, Morgan, and Ogg (2004), "is difficult to understand considering the belief most leaders appear to hold that people without information cannot take responsibility. People with information can hardly help but take responsibility" (p. 157).

Perceived problems associated with organizational communications within an educational context are frequently a topic of discussion whenever educators gather (Ramsay, 2002). What makes these discussions interesting to observe, according to Ramsay, "is [that] the very professionals who make their living talking, don't talk to each other enough" (p. 89). Even more interesting is the fact that central office personnel, who are frequently criticized for failing to communicate in an effective and timely manner, are normally selected from a pool of the most talented and experienced educators (Ramsay, 2002). Suggesting that all school districts are guilty of not paying a requisite amount of attention to this area of organizational life may be misleading. Organizations generally, and school districts specifically, are allocating ever-increasing amounts of their annual budgets and working hours to internal communication processes (Argenti, 2007).

Given the increased focus on communication structures and the shared background of educators, it is difficult to understand why little effort is expended to determine the effectiveness of and satisfaction with imposed communication processes. In a discussion on the lack of research attention, Gonring (1999) suggested that "communications are considered less important because they are difficult to measure....organizations should pay more attention to this area of organizational structure as there is a direct link between the various positive events happening in an organization and effective communication" (p. 5). The correlation between effective communication structures and organizational effectiveness is too significant to ignore (Argenti, 2007).

Although this study is not an examination of effectiveness, it is important to acknowledge the inextricable link between organizational effectiveness and communication structures and processes. Organizational effectiveness, according to Hoy

and Miskel (2004), "is the degree to which the actual outcomes of the organization are consistent with the expected outcomes" (p. 81). Jones et al. (2005) further described organizational effectiveness as "a measure of how efficiently and effectively managers use resources to satisfy customers and achieve organizational goals" (p. 5). However, achieving a categorical understanding of organizational effectiveness as it relates to communication media is difficult because this specific topic has been largely ignored in the research, and effectiveness is perceived differently by individuals and influenced by a number of factors, both internal and external to the organization (Jones et al., 2005).

Furthermore, the perceived effectiveness of organizational communication processes as a function of the overall organizational structure cannot be examined as an isolated activity (Conran, 1989). In a discussion of the interrelatedness of organizational structures and communication processes, Neher (1997) posited, "one's theory about the nature of organizations and management influences and, more importantly, constrains how one thinks about communication within organizations" (p. 60). He concluded, "the field of organizational communication itself represents a marriage between organizational theory and communication theory" (p. 60).

If for no other reason, the profitability of an organization may serve as sufficient incentive to pay more attention to the important role of internal communications. As Argenti (2007) observed, "From a purely organizational effectiveness perspective, the increasingly complex and highly competitive nature of organizations today puts great pressure on employees and calls for a more concerted effort in the area of internal communications" (p. 138).

Internal Communications as an Organizational Function

Communication as a function of an organizational structural plays an important role in determining whether or not the organization is successful at achieving its stated goals, whether those goals are public service or business oriented (Byrne & LeMay, 2006; Fraher, 1996). Fraher (1996) described the importance of paying attention to the role of communication within a fiscal context: "CEOs in the 1994 International Association of Business Communicators Excellence Study estimated the return on investment of their communication function was 184 percent or nearly two dollars for every dollar spent" (p. 4). Although educational success is not measured primarily in dollars and cents, parallels can be drawn between return on investment from a financial perspective and return on investment related to desired educational outcomes (Young, 2001).

Specifically isolating communication as the origin of an influence, positive or negative, is problematic because communication can reveal or hide, as well as eliminate, problems (Katz & Kahn, 1978). As Hoy and Miskel further observed, any discussion of the perceived effectiveness of a communication structure and its corresponding influence on overall organizational effectiveness must be tempered by the following caveats:

> Communication is difficult to isolate from such other administrative processes as deciding, motivating, and leading; not all school problems involve unsuccessful communication. Problems commonly attributed to poor interactions may reflect breakdowns in other fundamental components; and, Communication is a process that evokes action, but it is far from being the substance of good administration. It is no substitute for faulty ideas and misguided educational programs. (p. 341)

As the foregoing suggests, the negative effects of poor management are often mistakenly attributed to an organization's communication structure. Ultimately,

responsibility for all organizational structures, which includes the effective functioning of imposed communication processes, rests at the managerial level.

Managerial Functions of Communication

Managerial functions of communication, according to Mintzberg (1980), "can be divided into three groups, those that are concerned primarily with interpersonal relationships, those that deal primarily with transfer of information, and those that essentially involve decision-making" (p. 56). The primary focus of this study is specifically on the first two groups: activities associated with interpersonal relationships and the transfer of information. However, as Mintzberg acknowledged, "These roles may be described individually but they cannot be isolated; these roles form a gestalt—an integrated whole" (p. 58).

Mintzberg (1980) further argued that the interpersonal function "places the manager (administrator) in a unique role to get information—his external contacts bring special outside information and his leadership activities serve to make him a focal point for organizational information" (p. 56). In exercising these informational roles, the administrator can be viewed metaphorically as "the key nerve center of a special kind of organizational information" (p. 57). In this capacity, according to Hoy and Miskel (2004), "the manager receives information from an array of sources; processes this information by rejecting, altering, or approving; and disseminates this information to others in the organization" (p. 152).

As illustrated in Figure 4, according to Mintzberg (1980), "Managers perform three important roles within this context, the role of monitor, disseminator and spokesman" (p. 152). In the role of monitor, "the manager serves as the receiver and collector of information, thus enabling him [sic] to develop a thorough understanding of

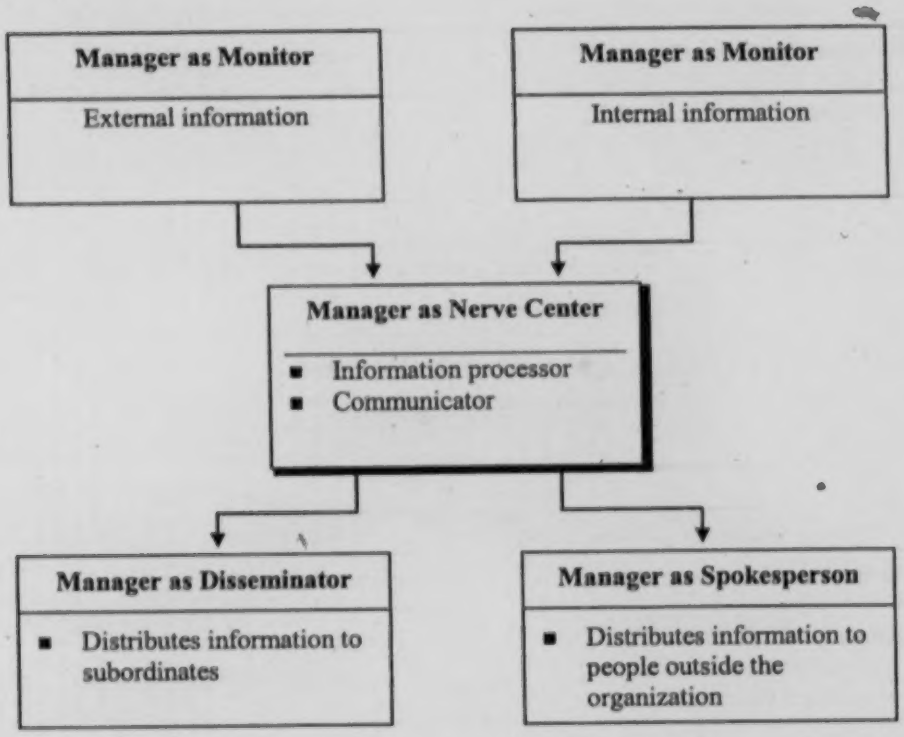

Figure 4. Roles of managers (adapted with permission from Mintzberg, 1973, p. 72).

the organization" (p. 57). Information received in the role of monitor falls into five categories that Sergiovanni, Kelleher, McCarthy, and Wirt (2004) identified:

1. Information about the progress of internal operations and events gleaned from reports, meetings, informal conversations, and observational tours of his or her organization.
2. Information about external events concerning parents and other community groups.
3. Information derived from the analysis of reports on various issues. Reports come from a variety of solicited and unsolicited sources.
4. Information gleaned from conferences, formal and informal meetings, and other sources that help the administrator to better understand significant ideas and trends from the environment that touches his or her organization.
5. Information brought to the administrator in the form of, or as a result of, pressures and demands from a variety of sources. (p. 152)

The role of disseminator, as Mintzberg (1980) described it, involves the transmission by the manager of special information into his organization" (p. 57). Within the educational context, Sergiovanni et al. (2004) found that administrators who act in the role of disseminator "pass into the organization both factual (what is) and value (what ought to be) information" (p. 153).

Recognizing the need to disseminate information is easy to understand; deciding what, how, and to whom information needs to be disseminated within the organization is a more complicated consideration. Factors such as the communication skills of the disseminator, the method of transmission, the timeframe within which the information must be passed on, and the method that the leader used to access the information in the first place all combine to play an important role in determining the effectiveness of the process (Mintzberg, 1980). Given the complexity and the time-consuming nature of the process, according to Sergiovanni et al. (2004), "not all of the relevant information gets passed down to subordinates, and this, in turn, affects the nature and quality of the administrator's work" (p. 153).

Mintzberg (1980) further explained that the final role in the process, that of spokesman, "involves the dissemination of the organization's information into its environment" (p. 57). Within the public education context, according to Sergiovanni et al. (2004), that process is more complicated because "the spokesperson (superintendent) is frequently called upon to serve the organization in a variety of, and in many cases conflicting, roles" (p. 153). "The superintendent of a public education institution is expected to speak on behalf of the organization, to lobby for the organization, to serve as a public relations figure and to represent the organization as an expert" (p. 153). To complicate the process even further, two key and often conflicting groups need to be kept

informed, "the organization's set of key influencers, as defined by legitimate authority, and the array of publics who by virtue of the political process exert influence" (p. 153). Although the foregoing discussion of roles relates more specifically to the transfer of information and interpersonal relationships, communication also plays a significant part in managerial decision making.

Mintzberg (1980) observed that "a manager's unique access to information and his special status and authority place him at the central point in the system by which significant (strategic) organizational decisions are made" (p. 57). Four key managerial roles emerge within this context: "entrepreneur, disturbance handler, resource allocator, and negotiator" (p. 57). As an entrepreneur, "the manager's role is to initiate change" (p. 57). In the disturbance-handler role, "the manager takes charge when his organization is threatened" (p. 57). As the resource allocator, the manager decides "where his organization will expend its efforts" (p. 57). Finally, the manager in the role of negotiator "deals with those situations in which he feels compelled to enter negotiations on behalf of his organization" (p. 57). Within this context, the ultimate goal of communication processes from a managerial perspective is to engage subordinates in effectively carrying out the primary purposes of an organization.

Engaging Subordinates in the Communication Process

Organizations deemed to be successful are those that are mindful of the need to engage staff members through the continuous communication of the shared goals and objectives of the organization (Nelson & Quick, 1997). This process of continuous engagement, frequently referred to as the *maintenance* process, is critical to organizational goal achievement (Mintzberg, 1980).

In further affirmation of the important role of communication in the maintenance process, Hoy and Miskel (2004) stated, "Goal directed behavior is elicited through communication; hence the greater the clarity and understanding of the message, the more likely the administrator will proceed in fruitful, goal-oriented directions" (p. 358). Furthermore, "the extent and success of the actions depend in large measure on how effectively communication about the goal and accompanying procedures are initiated and maintained" (p. 358).

Maintenance communication within the context of a formal organizational structure is typically organized as a vertical process. Hoy & Miskel (2004), identified five basic types of maintenance communication:

1. Instructions about specific tasks.
2. Rationale about why the task needs to be done and how it relates to other tasks.
3. Information about organizational procedures and practices.
4. Feedback about the performance levels of individuals.
5. Information regarding the organization's goals. (p. 367)

Maintenance communication may suggest the routine passage of easily accessible information throughout an organization, but this is not the case in many situations. Maintenance communications, according to Myers and Myers (1982), "do not sit around waiting to be discovered, nor do they float around randomly to be picked up by some lucky accident" (p. 367). Effective organizations "strategically identify the intent of the message, intended receiver(s) and action or response required" (p. 367). There is also an expectation within this process that the recipients of the messages will signal successful receipt by communicating upwards an understanding of and compliance with the directions (Nelson & Quick, 1997). Whereas identifying and effectively utilizing the

various components of message passage is critically important, equally important is the strategic process of media selection.

Media Selection

Although the literature supported the critical role of organizational communications generally, it also illustrated that the physical structure of the media used has an influence on the interpretation of the information received (Daft, 1999). Neher (1997) described the physical structure of communication as "the use of some physical medium by which the signs constituting a message are observable" (p. 19). He further recognized that "the medium provides the means by which the sign behavior of one person can be brought to the attention of another person" (p. 19). Physical media, used to communicate extensively in organizations, occur in a variety of forms such as e-mail, video conferencing, and face-to-face conversation (Daft, 1999). Unfortunately, the influences of the various forms of media on organizational behavior are frequently overlooked, often at the expense of overall organizational effectiveness (Argenti, 2007).

According to Argenti (2007), "The increasingly complex and highly competitive nature of today's environment puts greater pressure on employees and also calls for a more concerted effort in the area of internal communications" (p. 138). Argenti maintained that "today's employees are increasingly demanding participation in the conversations that are driving organizational change" (p. 138). Although the foregoing refers to demands for more strategic and, ultimately, more effective communication media within a business context, undoubtedly the same expectations hold true in school districts. This increased focus on internal communications is also generating much discussion on media selection.

Information Richness and Communication Media

With respect to media selection, Jones et al. (2005) stated, "To be effective communicators, managers need to select an appropriate communication medium for each message they send" (p. 532). In choosing the appropriate medium, managers must consider three important factors:

1. The first and most important is the level of information richness that is needed. Information richness is the amount of information a communication medium can carry and the extent to which the medium enables the sender and receiver to reach a common understanding.
2. The second factor that managers need to take into account in selecting a communication medium is the time needed for communication, because managers' and other organizational members' time is valuable.
3. The third factor that affects the choice of the communication medium is the need for a paper or electronic trail or some kind of written documentation that a message was sent and received. (p. 533)

Carlson and Davis (1998) suggested that "the most desirable characteristic for communication is media accessibility, but this variable is over-ridden at times by the presence of other needs, such as the need to communicate rich information to build relationships and interpret situations" (p. 353). Selecting the appropriate media, according to Neher (1997), requires consideration of three factors: "media richness, situational factors and symbolic meaning of media" (p. 174). Media richness, often referred to as *channel richness*, is based on the belief that "some media provide richer, or more complete, information than others" (p. 174). Daft (1999) further described channel (media) richness "as the amount of information that can be transmitted during a

communication episode" (p. 165). Neher (1997) identified four components of media richness: (a) timing and amount of feedback: A rich medium provides for instantaneous feedback; (b) presence of multiple cues, such as nonverbal communication, facial expressions, tone of voice, and so on; (c) natural use versus mathematical symbols or other nonlinguistic codes; and (d) the personal material allowed or encouraged in the message; this factor is also referred to as *social presence* (p. 174).

Neher (1997) also stated that situational factors such as "time, distance, and financial constraints may dictate the choice of certain media over others for particular messages" (p. 175). Furthermore, the perceived symbolic meaning of the media to be utilized often results in the deliberate and calculated selection of a medium type that will signal that the information being sent is important and needs to be paid attention to (Neher, 1997).

The effectiveness of a selected medium, Daft (1999) explained, "is influenced by three characteristics: the ability to handle multiple cues simultaneously; the ability to facilitate rapid two-way feedback; and, the ability to establish a personal focus for the communication" (p. 165). The foregoing describes influences on the effectiveness of a chosen medium, but we are also cautioned that any discussion of media effectiveness must be tempered by an understanding that effectiveness is contextual and can be affected by a variety of factors such as cultural issues, personal preferences, and interpersonal relationships (Salmon & Joiner, 2005). These concerns, discussed only briefly in this section, will be examined in greater detail later in the chapter.

Rapidly changing technology is also having a significant influence on the face of organizational communication. Yet, in spite of the rapid explosion of communication technology, the three most commonly used organizational communication processes,

presented in order of channel richness, are face-to-face communication, electronic information technology, and written communications (Daft, 1999).

As the literature acknowledged, face-to-face communication continues to be the most effective medium in terms of creating understanding and commitment to organizational goals (Daft, 2003; Ho, 2001; Mintzberg, 1980; Neher, 1997). As Jones et al. (2005) recommended, "for messages that are important, personal, or likely to be misunderstood, it is often well worth a manager's time to use face-to-face communication" (p. 534).

Communication channels, according to Salmon and Joiner (2005), "can be placed on a continuum where face-to-face contact is considered the richest channel" (p. 57). They suggested that "channels higher in richness are preferred when processing equivocal information because such channels possess a number of unique characteristics that promote a shared understanding" (p. 57). Equivocality, as Sheer and Chen (2004) reported, "is a key to understanding the amount and type of information, the kind of interaction, and the communication media that are most effective for delivering the message" (p. 79). Although face-to-face communications remain the most effective, the effects of electronic information technology cannot be ignored.

Electronic Information Technology

Although not deemed as effective as face-to-face communication in terms of channel richness, the rapid explosion of electronic information technology over the past decade has in many cases increased employees' access to information (Neher, 1997; Nelson & Quick, 1997; Jones et al., 2005). However, the overuse of electronic information technology, according to Argenti (2007), also has a downside because "employees are being bombarded by information, especially given the near ubiquity of

e-mail and voice mail" (p. 146). Argenti added that "information overload was one of the primary complaints cited in every corporate survey conducted in 1997 by Vander Houwen Public Relations" (p. 146). Commenting on this overreliance on technology, Argenti suggested, "managers should resist the impulse to move all communication online unless they are sure all employees will use this medium" (p. 147). Moreover, "an effective internal communication strategy should focus on both content and channel, recognizing that use of multiple channels offers the best potential for success" (p. 146). Whereas organizations are rapidly expanding the role of electronic technology, written communications continue to play a significant role in terms of organizational communication strategy.

Written Communications

Managers tend to believe that written media rank highly in terms of media richness; however, Daft (1999) posited that "written media that are personalized, such as notes and letters, can be personally focused but they convey only cues written on paper and are slow to provide feedback" (p. 166). Unaddressed written media, such as fliers and information brochures, are even lower in terms of richness (Russ, Daft, & Lengel, 1990). Commenting on effective strategies for the use of written communication, Jones et al. (2005) cautioned that "managers must make sure that messages sent by this form of media are written clearly and in a language that all receivers will understand" (p. 537).

Discussions of commonly used organizational media in terms of information richness cannot be presented in an overly prescriptive manner because each organization and the individuals within have unique needs that should dictate which medium is most effective for each setting (Russ et al., 1990). Prescribing one best way to communicate is clearly not possible in that each medium and the context within which it is used has the

potential to enhance or detract from the effectiveness of the message (Trevino, Lengel, & Daft, 1987).

In an attempt to understand how and why managers choose one medium over another, Trevino et al. (1987) asked 65 managers to offer decision-making rationale for their medium selection. An analysis of their responses revealed that they made media-selection decisions primarily according to three specific criteria: (a) ambiguity of message content and perceived richness of the communication medium selected, (b) symbolic cues provided by a particular medium, and (c) situational determinants such as time and distance. Argenti (2007), in a further discussion of appropriate medium selection, proposed that

> the best way for managers to gather critical information is to get out from behind their desks, put down their cell phones, get away from their computers, and go out and get to know the people who are working for them. . . . No other method works as well, and no "quick fix" will satisfy the basic need for interaction with other employees. (p. 153)

The literature review thus far has focused primarily on communication structures and media richness, but the role of informal communication structures cannot be overlooked.

Influence of Informal Communication Structures

As Hoy and Miskel (2004) acknowledged, "informal networks or grapevines exist in all organizations regardless of how elaborate the formal communication system happens to be" (p. 364). Neher (1997) contended that informal messages "tend to be the sort that would be perceived as inappropriate for formal channels" (p. 173). Communication on the grapevine is "usually oral, through personal and informal contacts, and usually occurs in one of two forums, gossip and rumor" (p. 173). Gossip "is

usually personal information that is considered confidential and unrelated to organizational functions" (p. 173), whereas rumors "tend to have some relevance for the organization itself" (p. 173). Neher suggested that "rumors tend to flourish in situations of high uncertainty or when there is a lack of hard information about important matters" (p. 173).

Lewis (as cited in Hanson, 1985) stated, "information travelling through an informal communication network undergoes at least three significant changes" (p. 268). The first change is "leveling: the dropping of details, a simplifying of context and qualifications" (p. 268). The second change is "sharpening: the preference for vivid and dramatic treatments of the information. In this stage subordinates add their own details in an effort to add emphasis or make it more entertaining for their colleagues" (p. 268). The final change to the information is "assimilation; that is, the tendency of people to adjust or modify rumor, to mold it to fit their needs" (p. 268).

Hoy and Miskel (2004) discussed the positive aspects of informal networks within an educational context: "People who are in groups, cliques, or gangs tend to reach an understanding on things or issues very quickly. They communicate easily and well among themselves" (p. 364).

The negative aspect of informal networks is the perception that those who have access gain an advantage as a result of their relationship. More important, the perception—or the actual existence—of an informal network accessed by only a select group has the potential to sow seeds of dissension and mistrust (Hoy & Miskel, 2004).

It is important to acknowledge that informal networks can, and do, play an important role in the overall communication process (Neher, 1997). Many leaders rely on informal networks to receive unfiltered feedback on important matters such as

organizational environment and reaction to directives, as well as to provide them with opportunities to further clarify new initiatives (Neher, 1997). Regardless of the communication structure chosen, the effectiveness of each is measured by its ability to facilitate the flow of critical information when and where required.

Communication Structures

As Figure 5 illustrates, communication occurs within a structure that involves both a sender and a receiver. The sender encodes a message with certain intentions and transmits it though a medium to a receiver, who then decodes the message and provides feedback to the original sender (Mintzberg, 1973; Daft, 2003).

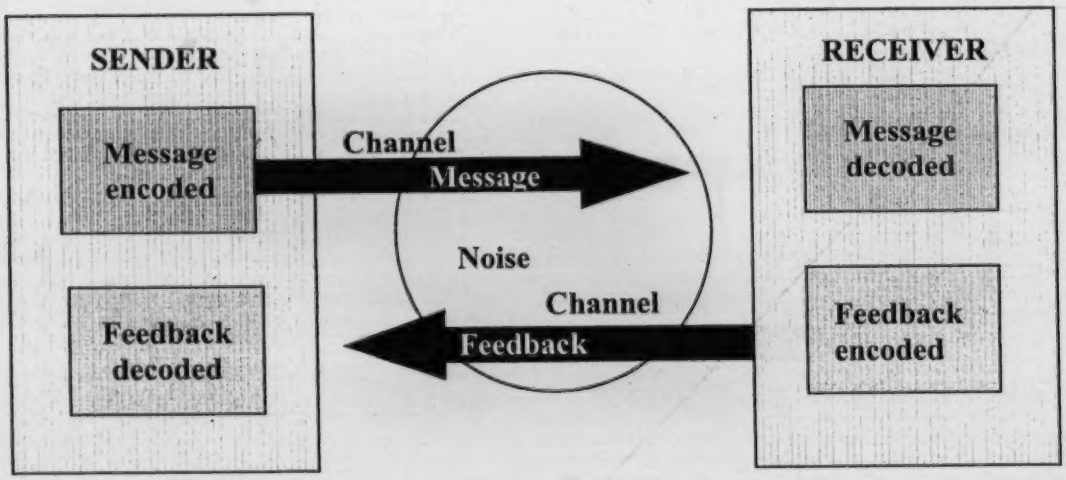

Figure 5. Communication structure (Daft, 2003, p. 567).

Effective communication occurs when information is shared in a manner that produces a degree of understanding and desired action between two or more people (Lewis, 1975). The main purpose of communication within an organization, according to D'Aprix (1996), "is to achieve a common understanding of, and focus on, what the organization is trying to achieve" (p. 3). Within an educational context, a good test of the

effectiveness of a school district's communication structure, as Overstreet-Miller and Gorman (1995) explained, "is its ability to get through to people who don't trust you, don't want to change, and who would prefer to hunker down and wait for the transformation effort to pass by rather than be part of it" (p. 4).

When an organization's communication structure is not perceived to be operating effectively, those in charge of the organization often mistakenly believe that they can improve the communication and reporting structure simply by flattening the bureaucratic structure of the organization itself (Mai & Akerson, 2003). However, as Mai and Akerson posited, "they often find they have simply exchanged one heavily-formalized, communication structure for another" (p. 38). Neher (1997) observed that "flattening a reporting structure can create communication disadvantages" (p. 156) and that "one person being assigned responsibility for communicating with several subordinates may become overloaded and unable to process all the messages moving up or down the ladder" (p. 156). Discussing the potential information blockages created through the flattening of an organizational structure, Mai and Akerson stated, "Organizational hierarchy by its nature creates social distance that in turn can inhibit candor and openness" (p. 93). The inclination of organizations to organize themselves into flattened hierarchies in an attempt to achieve improved information flow throughout the organization has the potential to compromise relationships and dehumanize affiliations (Mai & Akerson, 2003).

To counteract potentially negative effects on communication processes, communication within organizations with large spans of control require more strategic planning and attention to detail (Glascock & Taylor, 2001). Conran (1989) addressing communication within a large span of control, stated, "The how of communications of

less frequency or with persons at a greater distance should receive more careful planning" (p. 160).

Mai and Akerson (2003) commented on the potential negative effects of larger and more formalized communication structures in terms of limiting opportunities for subordinates to engage in meaningful two-way communication: "Leadership cannot exist in the absence of dialogue with those who agree to be led" (p. 14). Overly formalized, bureaucratized communication structures, frequently a byproduct of flattened organizational structures, do not allow senior leaders "to reach out to frontline leaders in some special way, to create the basis for new trust levels" (p. 93). Ramsay (2002) discussed the potential negative effects of providing limited opportunities for feedback within a large-scale flattened organizational structure: "Without internal critics, organizations get soft and complacent and lose their edge" (p. 105). Kowalski (2005) further commented on the value of feedback: "When communication, within a large organization, produces mutual understandings, mutual influence, negotiation, openness, credibility, and trust, positive organizational development becomes more probable" (p. 108).

Creating and sustaining a climate of trust through effective communication processes, regardless of the organization's size or structure, must be a leadership priority (Mai & Akerson, 2003, p. 2). As Mai and Akerson suggested, the greatest communication challenge for leaders in all organizations is their ability to "extend trust, share information, provide direction and orientations, and in general develop a feeling of a common stake in the organizations future" (p. 2). D'Aprix (1996) further acknowledged the critical role of the leader in ensuring that this area of communication receives the requisite amount of attention: "Communication can and must be horizontal as well as

bottom-up and top-down; the leadership must be like the orchestra leader in arranging, leading, and responding to the flow of music" (p. 133).

Although the discussion thus far has related more specifically to the perceived effectiveness of imposed communication structures, barriers to the effectiveness of those structures can occur in a variety of forms. The barriers that the literature most frequently acknowledged are multiple messaging, lack of strategic message structure, message clarity, message spin, and organizational culture (Argenti 2007; Defleur et al., 1993). The structural inhibitors or barriers to effective communication flow, according to Nelson and Quick (1997), "are the factors that block or significantly distort successful communication" (p. 229). Jones et al. (2005) warned that "when managers and other members of the organization are ineffective communicators, organizational performance suffers, and any competitive advantage the organization might have is likely to be lost" (p. 533).

With respect to multi-messaging, messages that originate within organizations normally carry both surface and deeper meanings, each of which detracts from or enhances the message's intent (Defleur et al., 1993). Surface meanings "carry all the intended elements that provide the recipient with sufficient information to carry out the purposes of the message" (p. 11), whereas deeper meanings "include all those encoded messages which allow the recipient to understand the intent of the message within a particular organization's culture" (p. 11). The most significant barrier created by perceived multi-messaging occurs when intended recipients believe that a communication carries more than one message, and they have to decide what they should take from the process (Argenti, 2007).

The lack of a strategic intent in determining which structure works best with a particular message can also create barriers to effective communication (Argenti, 2007). According to Argenti (2007), "the two most effective message structures are direct and indirect" (p. 35). The direct structure reveals "the main point first and then explains why" (p. 34), and the indirect structure explains "why first and then reveals the main point" (p. 34). Each structure can be effective; however, to avoid multiple and often erroneous interpretations of messages, Argenti recommended that "organizations should be as direct as possible with as many constituencies as possible because indirect communications are confusing and harder to understand" (p. 35).

Lack of *clarity*—frequently described as *fidelity* within communication structures—in meaning may also distort messages and in the process negatively influence the organization's goals (Neher, 1997). Fidelity in this context refers to "the faithfulness of reproduction of messages: The message that enters the channel at one end is faithfully or accurately reproduced at the other end" (p. 156).

Subordinates who are dissatisfied with an organization's communication processes often accuse communication originators of "spinning" the message in an effort to put negative messages in the best possible light or to stop negative messages from being broadcast (Hoy & Miskel, 2004). Putting a positive light on a negative message may have organizational benefits; however, communication structures may also be used for negative purposes (Defleur et al., 1993). Within a research context, interest in the negative use of communication structures heightened during World War II when it became obvious that militaries on all sides of the conflict were strategically and very effectively using propaganda and other persuasive techniques to gain popular support (Defleur et al., 1993).

Finally, organizational culture can also play an important role in determining an organization's overall effectiveness, specifically as it relates to communication (Neher, 1997). According to Neher (1997), "communication and culture have a reciprocal relationship in that what we mean by culture comes into being as people communicate with one another" (p. 144). Furthermore, "cultural values and practices evolve through some organizational history, which become an important element in context" (p. 145). Messages and actions "are interpreted in terms of whether they fit with this cultural context or not" (p. 145).

Leaders can mitigate the effects of perceived or real barriers to effective communication flow by strategically and thoughtfully preparing messages for subordinates. According to Defleur et al. (1993), managers can enhance positive information flow by ensuring that "the message is selected and constructed verbally and nonverbally in such a way that barriers to communication will be minimized" (p. 28).

Although the strategic nature of communication construct appears to be largely ignored as a focal point for research within an educational context, the literature on effective and lasting school reform frequently referred to communication as the key element (Hoy & Miskel, 2004; Kowalski, 2005). Despite the lack of research on educational institutions and communication structures specifically, the larger body of research on communications within institutions generally allows parallels to be drawn.

Educational Structures and Communication Effectiveness

Kowalski (2005) discussed the important role of communication within the educational context: "The current school reform movement demonstrates that relationships enhancing communication rather than top-down dicta are necessary for advancing educational agendas" (p. 101). Kowalski suggested that "effective

communication behaviour used by superintendents has (positively) influenced both school culture and productivity" (p. 101). However, he cautioned that

> larger school districts, structured with multiple administrative levels, tend to create indirect and often impersonal communication channels between the superintendent and the principals. In doing so, the relationship has a tendency to become muted over time and restricted to superficial interaction. (p. 101)

Administrators who operate within an educational context, Hoy and Miskel (2004) advised, "must take the time to understand the managerial aspects of communication because it underlies or infuses the interpersonal, organizational, and administrative processes and structures of schools [districts]" (p. 341). This communication "flows throughout the organization and influences virtually all structures and process" (p. 357).

Communication processes are frequently the focal point of criticism, specifically those related to the perceived success or lack of success of overall school reforms. However, categorically isolating communication as the one and only factor that influences the perceived effectiveness of an organization may be somewhat presumptuous (Hoy & Miskel, 2004). Any examination of communication processes must be tempered by an understanding that communication is only one piece of a much larger organizational strategy (Hoy & Miskel, 2004; Neher, 1997).

Although no direct comparative research is available, an examination of the literature suggests that the purposes of communication within educational settings may vary little from the purposes of communicating within organizations generally (Fullan, 2001; Kowalski, 2005). As I alluded to earlier, whether the organization is motivated by profit or public service, they have key similarities, which Myers and Myers (1982)

identified as "production and regulation, innovation and individual socialization and maintenance" (p. 16).

Hoy and Miskel (2004) explained that production and regulation purposes "include activities specifically aimed at doing the primary work of the organization. They include, setting goals and standards, transmitting facts and information, making decisions, and leading and influencing others" (p. 358). In addition, innovation purposes "include messages about generating new ideas and changing programs, structures and procedures" (p. 358).

The socialization and maintenance communication purposes "affect participants' self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, and motivation to integrate their individual goals with the school's [district's] objectives" (Hoy & Miskel, 2004, p. 358). Geddes (1995) found that in communicating for socialization and maintenance purposes, leaders must be aware of "how our communication is perceived" (p. 24). The intent of the leader's message may be to "empower others through his or her communication, but the perception of staff may be entirely different" (p. 24).

Formal communication, particularly in a larger organizational context, normally occurs within a very clearly designed set of rules and, influenced by such factors as the institution's culture and reporting structure, is restricted to interactions between specifically designated parties (Defleur et al., 1993). The challenge that these organizations face "is to provide for a formal communication network that will both maintain cohesion in the group and make it possible for it to attain its goals" (p. 206). School district superintendents, particularly those who serve as CEOs of large districts, also face similar challenges.

Over the past two decades educational researchers have increasingly recognized the important role of superintendents in terms of developing and sustaining effective channels of communication (J. H. Berg, 1995; Kowalski, 2005). As I acknowledged earlier, this particular area of the superintendent's responsibilities has not been singled out for extensive research, yet the role of superintendent as primary leader of school reform continually emerges as the central theme in educational literature (Fullan, 2001; Pajack & Glickman, 1989).

Kowalski (2005), in a discussion relating to the lack of focused research in this area, stated, "the topic of communication has received only modest attention in the literature on school administration and has been essentially ignored in relation to school reform" (p. 102). He suggested that this is problematic because "communication skills have been recognized as essential for school superintendents from the position's inception" (p. 112). He goes on to state, "this acknowledgement appears to have been framed by two myopic assumptions: Anyone can communicate effectively, and administrators should alter their communicative behaviour as they transition from one role to another" (p. 112).

The superintendent, although not individually responsible for creating and sustaining an effective educational environment, is ultimately responsible for setting direction and sustaining a positive environment through professional dialogue (Pajack & Glickman, 1989). Ever-increasing expectations, which are particularly inherent in initiatives designed to bring about school reform, have served to heighten awareness of the superintendent's influence in setting district direction through communication (J. H. Berg, 1995). More specifically, conflicting forces, constant transformational imperatives, the desire to share leadership, and increasingly more complicated decision-making

processes have required that superintendents develop specialized interpersonal skills (J. H. Berg, 1995; Peterson & Short, 2001).

Along with the expectation that superintendents will possess a personal communication skill set is the expectation that they will be able to articulate and solicit support for a vast array of policy issues and decisions from a wide spectrum of stakeholders (Petersen & Short, 2002). At the same time, they are expected to effectively manage the ever-increasing flow of information through multiple media forms.

Given the multiple sources of information that emanate from all levels of an organization, the task of communicating becomes more complicated when the leader attempts to determine the appropriate balance between the frequency and extent of information that needs to be shared (Fraher, 1996). Too little information means that subordinates have a tendency to believe that key information is being withheld. Too frequent and predictable the information flow leads to the recipient's tendency not to give the message the level of importance it deserves. Commenting on finding the appropriate balance, Fraher recommended that "communication from the CEO should be somewhat regular, though not too frequent or predictable" (p. 7). Fraher (1996) further commented on the dilemma of achieving the appropriate balance by stating "a CEO who communicates too frequently may dilute the potency of his special communication role and inadvertently undermine the communication role of other managers" (p. 7). Managers who are deemed to be the most effective communicators are those who continually monitor their communication practices to ensure that an appropriate level of information is moving up and down the organizational structure (Fraher, 1996).

In a detailed case study of a superintendent who was considered a leading change agent in school reform, Judith Berg (1995) found that "the more frequently the

superintendent communicated concerns, desires and hopes, the more his staff members perceived their input as meaningful, and willingly accepted the superintendent as the final authority" (p. 20). In fact, the more personal the relationships were perceived to be, "the more supportive the staff members seemed to feel about his decisions" (p. 20). Although it is generally acknowledged that educational reform is deemed to be most successful when it occurs at the school level (Ouichi, 2004), the success or failure of district initiatives is inextricably tied to a leader's ability to engage in ongoing, meaningful, two-way communication (Fullan, 1991).

Achieving that unanimity of purpose within a school system, not unlike any other complex organization, is difficult because each party brings a different perspective and interpretation to the flow of messages. Within the educational context, school-based principals may acknowledge and publicly describe their role within a larger organizational structure, yet have a tendency to view themselves and their schools within a much narrower perspective (Shaver, 2004). On the other hand, school superintendents interpret communications in a more systemic manner. Shaver (2004) suggested that "superintendents view the building administrator and each individual school site as one piece of a larger and more intricate puzzle" (p. 77). Accordingly, information directed upward "is invariably filtered through a district lens that requires the superintendents to ask how the information will impact the district as a whole" (p. 77). The filtration process is further complicated by external factors such as "alignment with district/provincial vision/initiatives and internal/external availability of resources" (p. 83). Consequently, it is imperative that "an administrator consider all perspectives when planning communication with district personnel" (p. 83).

This study focused on principals' satisfaction with an imposed communication structure; however, the context of the study, situated within a large district structure, must also be acknowledged. As I discussed earlier in the literature review, communicating within a larger organizational structure presents certain challenges and in the process can influence perceptions of communication effectiveness. Larger districts tend to create indirect and often impersonal communication channels between the superintendent and the principals and in that regard require more strategic planning and attention to detail (Glascock & Taylor, 2001).

Summary

The foregoing examination of the literature on organizational communications results in a comprehensive understanding of the critical role of communication structures and leaders' use of those structures in terms of developing and sustaining organizational effectiveness. As Kowalski (2005) pointed out, "findings linking leader communication and organizational outcomes certainly are not novel to education; many researchers have discussed the nexus between open interpersonal communication and organizational effectiveness" (p. 101). Although the following cannot be viewed as an all inclusive list, the literature review informed the construct of this study by establishing the following assumptions of effective organizational communication:

1. Organizational and human communications are inextricably linked.
2. Correlation between effective communication structures and organizational effectiveness is too significant to ignore.
3. Regardless of organizational type, managers play a definitive role in determining the overall effectiveness of imposed communication processes.

4. Organizations deemed to be the most effective are those that are mindful of the need to continually engage staff members in meaningful dialogue related to the organization's goals and objectives.
5. The physical structure of employed communication media influences the perceived effectiveness of information received.
6. Informal communication networks exist in all organizations and, depending on the culture of an organization, serve to positively enhance or detract from communication.
7. Flattening an organizational structure can create communication disadvantages.
8. Barriers to effective communication include inhibitors such as multiple messaging, lack of strategic message structure, lack of message clarity, message spin, lack of role clarity, and lack of trust.
9. Feedback that is actively solicited and positively received contributes positively to employees' perceptions of the effectiveness of an organization.

As the literature review also revealed, in spite of the extensive reference to the important function of communication structures generally, research on perceptions of the effectiveness of communication structures within an educational context continues to be limited (Kowalski, 2005). Accordingly, the lack of research focus in this specific area of organizational structure has provided the rationale and support for this particular study.

The next chapter discusses the methodology that I utilized in the study. In that regard, Chapter 3 is organized under the following headings: (a) research design, (b) interviews and (c) methodology justification.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Over the past few decades, purists from both qualitative and quantitative camps have leveled criticism at each other's methodology. Quantitative researchers criticized the qualitative approach for its apparent lack of a scientific approach to data analysis, which, in their opinion, led to conclusions being unscientifically based on personal interpretation (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Adherents of the qualitative approach, on the other hand, believed that quantitative researchers focused too narrowly on statistical analysis and, in the process, ignored the effect that relational factors have on the subjects under study (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Recent developments in research methodology recognize that both have their place; in fact, both can play an important role in ensuring the internal validity and trustworthiness of the results.

Given the breadth and depth of this study and the construct of the questions, I believed that I could best achieve the goals of the research by using a mixed methodology approach. In discussing the process that a researchers should use to determine their methodology, Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) advised that because "the question determines the design of the study, the data collection approach, . . . the best method is the one that answers the research question(s) most efficiently" (p. 167). Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) further recommended the following:

> Today's research world is becoming increasingly inter-disciplinary, complex and dynamic; therefore many researchers need to complement one method with another, and all researchers need a solid understanding of multiple methods used by other scholars to facilitate communication, to promote collaboration and to provide superior research. (p. 15)

Denzin and Lincoln (1998), in a similar discussion explained, "Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methods ensures the use of different sets of data, different types of analyses, and theoretical perspectives which combine to provide a rich understanding of the phenomenon being studied" (p. 46). My utilization of quantitative and qualitative methodologies in this study reflects my belief that both would serve a vital role in achieving the most comprehensive results. The questionnaire not only helps the participants focus specifically on their satisfaction with district communications, but also provides a valid framework for the qualitative interviews. Spindler and Spindler (1992) affirming those beliefs stated:

> Instrumentation and quantification are simply procedures employed to extend and reinforce certain kinds of data, interpretations and test hypotheses across samples. Both must be kept in their place. One must avoid their premature or overly use as a security mechanism. (p. 69)

According to B. L. Berg (1995), "The quantitative approach provides a numerical and relational understanding of the concepts being studied" (p. 6), whereas the qualitative approach provides "meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols and description of things" (p. 6). Finally, Glesne (1999) posited that "the use of multiple data-collection methods contributes to the trustworthiness of the data" (p. 31). "The more sources tapped for understanding, the richer the data and the more believable the findings" (p. 31). I believe that the methodology utilized in this study achieved the intended objectives.

Research Design

In an effort to capture a breadth and depth of understanding in matters related to the research question, this study employed a multiple approach to data collection. The process included (a) the distribution of a questionnaire to all 202 serving EPSB principals

(Appendix A), (b) followed by a series of qualitative interviews with 12 principals selected in a non-random stratified manner (see Appendix B for the interview questions), and (c) an additional review of the literature to further explain the significance of the results.

Questionnaire Construction

The design of the questionnaire involved an extensive review of the literature on instrument design and interpretation. To acknowledge the complexities of district governance in a large district, I examined research projects on the role of the school superintendent in an effort to increase the accuracy of my data (Leithwood & Musella, 1991; Murphy & Hallinger, 1986). The development and content of the survey instrument were influenced by frequent discussions with serving school-based administrators, district-level administrators, and university professors, as well as informal discussions with professionals from outside the field of education.

The design of the questionnaire, which used a 5-point scale, gave principals the opportunity to rate the effectiveness of, and satisfaction with, district communications that involved a variety of variables. I solicited demographic information, although it was not the primary focus of the study, in an attempt to determine the associations among selected demographic variables and perceptions of principals in a variety of areas.

Pilot Test

Upon completion of the draft questionnaire, a pilot group that consisted of three district-level administrators, three serving principals, and two university professors critically reviewed the instrument and provided feedback. I gave the participants in the study a detailed briefing on the purposes of the study and asked them (a) to comment specifically on the quality of the questions, the ease of understanding, and the structure of

the questionnaire: Would the questions allow or even cause the participants to focus specifically on the effectiveness of EPSB's communication structure? and (b) to make suggestions for questions that would foster a greater understanding of the questions under study.

Following the completion of a series of drafts in further consultation with the pilot group participants, I completed the final instrument and field-tested it with three school-based administrators. Following an extended discussion of the intent of the study, the three administrators offered very minor suggestions on improving the wording and presentation and expressed their belief that the selected instrument would capture the desired data. Utilizing feedback from the pilot group and a final review of the literature on survey instrument design, I finalized the questionnaire and prepared it for distribution to all 202 serving EPSB principals.

Distribution and Returns

The population surveyed included all 202 serving principals (total population) within EPSB. In May 2005 I mailed the survey packages (Appendices A, B, C, and D) plus two postage-paid return envelopes (the survey and volunteer form) to the principals, and three weeks later I mailed follow-up reminder letters to the entire survey population. Additionally, I approached individual principals whenever an opportunity arose and encouraged them to participate in the survey. The overall return rate was 51.5% (104/202). Considering the number of both external and internal studies in which EPSB principals are asked to participate on a yearly basis, I believe that the rate of return did not detract from the study's validity. Given that this was a study of an entire population of one district's principals and that the demographic profiles of those who chose to participate are not systematically different from those of the entire population and the rate

of return is consistent with the rate of return of other surveys conducted in the district, I believe that the results of the study are internally valid.

Method of Analysis

I calculated descriptive statistics using percentage frequency distributions on a variety of variables and captured the variables in the following areas of the study: (a) the frequency of direct communication with the superintendent, (b) satisfaction with the method/timeliness of response from the superintendent, (c) the effectiveness of EPSB's communication structure compared to more traditional reporting/communicating structures, (d) satisfaction with the number of opportunities to have direct input into district policy decisions, (e) satisfaction with the openness of the communication structure, (f) the influence of the communication structure with respect to carrying out assigned duties as a site-based administrator, and (g) the degree to which the appointment of assistants to the superintendent (executive directors) has affected communication between principals and superintendents.

Additionally, I reviewed and categorized the responses provided in the three open-ended questions and reported those responses when issues related to the communication structure emerged. Upon analysis of the data from the questionnaires, I designed the open-ended interview questions to further inform the findings and pilot-tested them in preparation for the interviews with the selected interview population.

Interviews

I asked all 202 EPSB principals to participate in the interview portion of the study, and 33 participants completed and returned the volunteer interview form and completed questionnaire forms. I limited my selection of interviewees to 12 serving principals and identified the participants through a purposive process to ensure an equal

balance between genders and Divisions I, II, and III. In follow-up interviews the participants clarified issues that were raised and extended their responses as required. Because of the large number of principals who volunteered to participate in the interview segment, I easily achieved a gender and division balance in selecting the interview participants. Utilizing information captured on the volunteer form, coupled with personal knowledge of the principals and their assignments, I then selected two male and two female principals each from the elementary, junior high and high school levels.

With respect to the selection process, I used personal knowledge and discussions with my supervisor to purposefully select principals whom I believed would be willing to provide the level of participation deemed necessary to capture an in-depth understanding of their perceptions of district communication processes. In discussing the importance of ensuring that researchers capture the maximum amount of data, Patton (1990) recommended that "researchers . . . select each of their subjects purposefully" (p. 169). In addition, "the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (p. 169). Selecting participants in this manner gave me an opportunity to broaden the findings of the study beyond simply determining the satisfaction levels of principals in a less than in-depth manner.

The ultimate goal of this study was to obtain meaningful descriptions of principal perceptions of satisfaction with district communication processes and identify areas for improvement where appropriate. Given EPSB's unique form of school governance, I also attempted to determine whether or not administrators who operate within a flattened hierarchy are satisfied with their ability to communicate directly with the superintendent.

Interview Pilot Test

Prior to conducting the first interview, I discussed the open-ended questions in depth with my doctoral supervisor, three principals who represented three divisions, and a doctoral student who was utilizing a similar research methodology. I then incorporated the input that I solicited and received from these sources into the design of the interview guide. A high school principal, a junior high school principal, and an elementary school principal whom I selected from the list of principals who returned the interview volunteer forms agreed to pilot the interview questions.

Following the pilot interviews, the reviewers verified that the questions were suitable for the purposes of the study. Based on their suggestion that I had posed a few of the questions in a manner that did not encourage the participants to expand their answers beyond a direct response, I slightly modified three of the questions to allow for a more open-format response. Given the minor nature of the changes and my follow-up discussions with the principals who participated in the pilot study, I decided to include the pilot interviews in the study.

Interviews

Between February and May 2006, I selected 12 principals—2 males and 2 females from each of the three divisions—for interviews. I prebooked the interviews, which lasted approximately 1.5 hours. A semi-structured interview approach gave the participants an opportunity to extend their answers beyond the findings of the questionnaires. The semi-structured questions asked the principals to comment specifically on their interpretation of the significant themes that emerged from the questionnaires. Prior to commencing the interviews, I reminded them of the need to

maintain the confidentiality of the data. During the analysis period I contacted a few of the principals who participated in the interviews to seek clarification of their responses.

Methods of Analysis

Data analysis, according to Glesne (1999), "is the process of organizing and storing data in light of your increasingly sophisticated judgements . . . of the meaning-finding interpretations that you are learning to make about the shape of your study" (p. 132). I conducted a descriptive analysis of the data from the surveys to determine the district's perceptions of effectiveness as a whole and whether personal demographics influenced those perceptions.

Analysis of the interview data commenced at the completion of the first interview. Glesne (1999) suggested that researchers "create relevant specific files on the social processes under investigation, as well as on several other categories such as subjectivity, titles, thoughts for introductory and concluding chapters and quotations from the literature" (p. 131). Although the files that I created in this study did not always adhere to this direction, I used the information that I captured under specific categories to inform the study and encourage further research in the emerging areas. I attempted to capture this information in a systematic manner as I analyzed the data; however, I initially used the files to focus the collection of the data, and the files helped me to expand the study into areas that I deemed relevant to the research topic.

I decided that repeatedly listening to the tapes would help me to reflect more fully on the emerging themes and their implications for the questions under study. I categorized the themes that repeated from one interview to another under specific headings. As I replayed the interviews, I transcribed, grouped, and arranged selected responses from the themes to inform the findings from the questionnaire. I believe that

the transcription of selected portions of the interviews within a thematic context helped me to gain an in-depth understanding of emerging and relevant themes. A trusted colleague with considerable research experience also listened to several of the tapes to ensure that I did not miss themes or misinterpret data.

Methodology Justification

As I outlined earlier in the study, the overall purpose of the research project was to determine (a) how satisfied principals in the Edmonton Public School District were with the structure of the communication between them and the superintendent and (b) whether modifications might be incorporated to make the system more effective.

The uniqueness of the EPSB governance structure, coupled with recent developments involving Alberta Education, combined to make this study timely, and it will significantly add to the body of knowledge on school district communication structures. The methodology was influenced by a review of the literature on the effectiveness of imposed communication structures and the methods used to measure that effectiveness.

As acknowledged earlier, in an effort to more fully tap the richness of the available data, I decided that a mixed methodology approach would be the most effective. The interviews that I conducted following the analysis of the data from the questionnaires clarified, corroborated, and extended my understanding of the questionnaire findings.

Validity

Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) reported that internal validity "has been conceptualized as the degree to which we can trust the conclusions/inferences of the researcher regarding the 'causal' relationship between variables/events" (p. 67).

Krathwohl (1993) further described internal validity as "the power of a study to support an inference that certain variables in it are linked in a relationship" (p. 371).

In an effort to capture valid results from this study, I preceded the development of the questionnaire by extensively reviewing the literature on survey instrument design, examining the instruments that other researchers who conducted similar studies used, pilot testing, and having extended conversations with respected researchers in the field of education. I developed the final instrument in consultation with my supervisor.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) asserted, "The basic issue in relation to trustworthiness is simple: How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of?" (p. 290). They further posited that the trustworthiness of data can be enhanced by attending to the characteristics of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure trustworthiness in this study, I followed several steps:

1. In the interviews that I conducted after analyzing the questionnaire data, I explored in greater detail the themes that emerged from my analysis of the questionnaire results. The data from the follow-up interviews confirmed the data from the questionnaires and thus resulted in a high level of confidence in the findings.
2. I compared the questionnaire responses, interview data, and relevant district documentation to identify emerging themes and contradictions. In discussions with the interview participants I examined themes and contradictions as they emerged from two or more data sources or discussed them in follow-up discussions with the participants during the data-analysis process.

3. As the research unfolded, I recorded and explored notes and reflections related to the information that I gleaned from the literature review, data-collection process, and discussions of my study.
4. I tape-recorded and frequently reviewed all of the interviews during the data analysis and made follow-up calls when the intent was unclear or when I required a more in-depth understanding of the participants' comments. A trusted colleague, who is also a district administrator and is completing a doctoral study, listened to several of the tapes to further increase my understanding of the information.
5. I frequently and extensively shared information with my university supervisor and the aforementioned colleague to further inform the analysis.
6. I had frequent—in some cases, daily—discussions with professional colleagues internal and external to EPSB about my study to ensure that I fully explored emerging perceptions as I analyzed the data. It is believed that my openness to listen to the participants served as a catalyst to encourage the interviewees to be open and frank.
7. I shared the final presentation of the information that I collected with three of the interview participants, my colleague, and my university supervisor, who all affirmed it.

Limitations

Several of the recommendations in the report of the Alberta Learning Commission (2003) that were designed to profoundly influence education practices in the Province of Alberta were implemented during the data-collection period. A number of those recommendations, although not specifically related to communication processes,

may have had some influence on principals' perceptions of satisfaction generally. Interviewing administrators during this period of transition resulted in a snapshot of current and past levels of satisfaction. However, the results may be affected by personal reactions to the change processes being experienced by study participants during the data-collection period.

As an employee of EPSB, I believe that my opinions and beliefs about district-level communication practices undoubtedly had some influence on the way that I structured and interpreted the research. However, as Glesne (1999) argued, "subjectivity, once recognized, can be monitored for more trustworthy research and how subjectivity, in itself, can contribute to research" (p. 105). I believe that in this study I have effectively acknowledged and monitored my personal experiences and beliefs, which has consequently resulted in a more in-depth and insightful study.

I acknowledge that the participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of EPSB's communication structure may have been affected by unrelated and, in many cases, unidentified factors (e.g., factors of a personal nature and the retirement of a popular superintendent). I have made no attempt to identify or study the influence of these factors.

Since I commenced this study, a number of significant changes have occurred in the district. The superintendent in place at that time announced his retirement prior to the end of the school year, and an acting superintendent was appointed to the position. That assignment was followed by the appointment of an external candidate who served partway through the school term and was then replaced by another acting superintendent. The current superintendent, an internal candidate, was appointed in June 2007. However, in spite of the changes to senior leadership during the data-collection period, the

organizational structure remained constant. Coupled with the changes to the senior leadership, I was appointed to a central office supervisory position in June 2004 and then to a more senior district management position in July 2007. I acknowledge that the changes in senior leadership and my personal position may have had some influence on my analysis and interpretation of the information that I collected. Although I acknowledged the changing influences during the research process, I made no attempt to measure the effects of a changing research environment and restricted the analysis to an interpretation of the perceptions that I gathered.

Finally, EPSB experienced several senior-level leadership changes during the course of the study, but I made no attempt to determine whether these changes affected the perceptions of the study participants.

Delimitations

This study was delimited to an examination of the communication structure and processes of an atypical district organized around a flattened governance structure. The study was also delimited to a collection of the perceptions of serving principals only, and I made no attempt to determine the superintendent's perceptions of the effectiveness of EPSB's communication processes.

Finally, much of the research on communications suggested an inextricable link between organizational and communication-structure effectiveness. Although I acknowledge and have discussed the link to a limited extent, it is also important to note that this study in not an examination of the effectiveness of a communication structure or the organization within which the study was situated.

Assumptions

This study is based on the following assumptions:

1. The participants provided trustworthy responses with regard to their level of satisfaction with EPSB's communication structure and their role in the process.
2. The principals believed that communication plays an important role in ensuring organizational effectiveness.
3. The principals were able to assess the effectiveness of the communication structures currently in place.

Transferability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) posited, "It is not a researcher's task to provide an index of transferability; it is his or her responsibility to provide a data base that makes transferability judgments possible on the part of potential appliers" (p. 316). In an attempt to address the issue of transferability, I have presented a detailed description of the study location. This approach, although it did not specifically focus on the elements of transferability, permits a comparison of the studied context to other possible contexts in which transfer might be contemplated or relevant.

Ethical Considerations

Cassell and Jacobs (1987) cautioned that "ethics is not something you can forget once you satisfy the demands of institutional review boards and other gatekeepers of research conduct" (p. 1). Adherents of a more scientific approach to ethical considerations have very specific guidelines that allow them to state categorically that they have conducted their research in a detached, ethical manner. Ethics in a qualitative study are not so easily addressed:

> In interpretative approaches, the researcher interacts with participants in order to understand their social constructions. This orientation thrusts upon the respondent

> two new roles: that of agency, self-determination, and participation in the analysis and reconstruction of the social world; and that of collaborator in both the processes and products of inquiries. (Lincoln, 1990, p. 290)

In other words, there is no such thing as an absolute definition of ethical practice. Each study is uniquely different in that issues that are of ethical concern in one study may not be problematic in another. In this study I presented each potential participant with a letter (Appendix C) that requested his or her consent to participate in the research project. The letter outlined the nature and purpose of the study, assured the participants that their interviews would be kept confidential, and restated the voluntary aspect of their participation, which allowed them to opt out at any time.

I asked the willing participants to sign a research consent form (Appendix D). The consent form assured them that I would keep all tapes and transcribed records of the interviews in a secured area, maintain confidentiality at all times, and destroy all records of a personal nature upon my completion of the doctoral program.

I applied for ethics approval (Appendix E) based on the foregoing principles and received formal approval to proceed with the study.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the methodology and data-collection processes in this study. Chapter 4 contains a description of the distribution of the surveys and an analysis of the data that I collected.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS: QUESTIONNAIRE

Introduction

This chapter presents the data that I collected through a survey entitled "Reporting and Communication Structure: Principal Communication Satisfaction Survey." In May 2005 I mailed questionnaires to all district principals (n = 202), and 104 principals completed and returned them, which represents a return rate of 51.4%.

The questionnaire consisted of three sections: Section 1 captured the demographic data of the principals in six subcategories. Section 2, which consisted of 15 sub questions, addressed issues related to the two research questions. The two questions were intended to determine how satisfied principals in Edmonton Public School District are with the communication structure between schools and the superintendent and whether or not modifications might be incorporated to make the system more effective. Section 3, which consisted of three subcategories, gave the participants an opportunity to provide more detailed and specific responses related to the communication structure.

Demographic Data

The demographic data of the respondents on age, assignment, and gender, are as follows: 48.5% of the principals were female, and 51.5% were male. With respect to current assignments, 58.7% of the principals were serving in the K–6 category, 18.35% were Grades 7–9 principals, and 5.8% were Grades 10–12 principals. The gender and age of the principals fell into the following categories: 43% of the principals were females aged 46+, 40.4% were males aged 46+, 5% were females aged 36–45, and 10% were males aged 36–45.

Response Data Analysis: Closed-Ended Questions

During the analysis phase, means of responses of different groups were compared to determine if there were significant differences. While 16 significant differences were identified, the differences related specifically to the use of fax, telephone and other media to communicate with the superintendent. Given the low reported rate of usage using each of these, it was determined the differences did not notably add to our understanding of the satisfaction levels of the principals. I also used frequency distributions to explain the participants' responses to a number of questions that examined their perceptions of the effectiveness of the district communication structure (Appendix E). A summary of the responses to each question follows.

1. I asked them to rate their level of direct communication with the superintendent on a *weekly*, *biweekly*, *monthly*, or *rarely* basis, and 67.3% of the principals rarely communicated directly with the superintendent.
2. In a question on the frequency and forms of direct communication with the superintendent, 69.2% reported rarely using the fax, 63.5% rarely used the telephone, 82.7% reported rare to medium use of e-mail, 89.4% reported rare to slightly more than rare visits to the superintendent, and 92.3% provided no response or rare use of other forms of media.
3. In a question on the frequency and forms of direct communication from the superintendent, 62.5% reported rare use of the telephone, 54.8% reported rare to slightly rare use of e-mail, 75.0% reported rare use of fax, 90.4% reported that the superintendent rarely communicated directly though personal visits, and 88.5% provided no response or indicated they rarely use other forms of media.

4. In response to questions on the principals' level of satisfaction with the method and timeliness of the superintendent's communication to respond to queries that the principals had initiated, 76.0% were satisfied to very satisfied with the method of response, and 85.5% were satisfied to very satisfied with the timeliness of the response.
5. I asked the participants to compare the perceived effectiveness of EPSB's communication structure with the traditional structures of other districts, and 64.5% rated the EPSB structure as being effective to very effective.
6. I asked the principals to rate the level of ease with which they communicated directly with the superintendent, and 74.9% reported that he was accessible to readily accessible.
7. In response to two questions on the effectiveness of the communication link between the principals and the superintendent, 73.1% believed that the link was effective to very effective in terms of supporting the principals' work, and 55.8% believed that the current communication structure effectively to very effectively informed the superintendent on issues involving their respective schools.
8. I asked the principals to rate their levels of satisfaction with the current communication structure, and 53.8% reported being satisfied to very satisfied with their ability to provide direct input into district policy-making decisions, 70.2% were satisfied to very satisfied with their ability to be open in their communications with the superintendent, and 74.0% reported being satisfied to very satisfied with their ability to provide input into district decision making through the Superintendent's Council.

9. I asked the principals to rate the degree to which direct access assisted them in carrying out their role as instructional leaders, and 54.8% reported the level as being moderate to high.
10. I asked the principals to rate the degree to which direct access assisted them in carrying out their role as site-based administrators, and 61.5% indicated a moderate to high degree.
11. To a question specifically about the assistants' influence on district communications, 63.4% responded that they did not believe that the appointment of assistants to the superintendent improved communication between them and the superintendent.
12. In response to a question that asked participants to rate the degree to which the appointment of the assistants to the superintendent has improved communication between them and the superintendent's office, 51.0% provided no response and 32.7% rated the degree as moderate to high.

Response Data Analysis: Open-Ended Questions

This section presents a synthesis of the open-ended responses to Section 3 of the questionnaire. I asked the principals to list the most positive aspects of the current communication structure and offer suggestions for improvement. I also included a third category, which gave the principals an opportunity to offer general observations and recommendations in an open-ended format.

I categorized the responses according to gender, age, and division to determine any differences in perception/satisfaction level among the various groupings. Given that the division 1 principals completed the majority of the questionnaire, they also made the majority of the comments. However, I detected no obvious differences in response

content among the various groupings. In reporting the responses, I include some verbatim quotations to illustrate the themes that emerged. Where appropriate, I have made minor editing changes to improve readability without affecting the substance of the responses.

Positive Aspects of the Communication Structure

Eighty-five participants chose to comment on the positive aspects of the district communication structure. Their responses touched on a wide-ranging variety of topics, but the following broad themes emerged from the data: (a) the accessibility of the superintendent, (b) the openness of the communication structure, (c) the involvement of the assistants to the superintendent in the communication process, (d) issues of trust, and (e) the governance structure.

To a lesser extent, the principals commented positively on other aspects of the communication structure, such as the role of the Superintendent's Council and their ability to communicate directly with the superintendent as senior members of the district administrative team. Additionally, a few principals offered recommendations in response to the question that asked them to list the positive aspects of the current communication structure.

Accessibility of the Superintendent

The majority of the respondents commented on the value that they placed on a communication structure that allowed easy access to the superintendent but at the same time gave them the latitude to operate their schools in a somewhat autonomous manner. For example, one respondent said:

> I rarely contact the superintendent directly but do feel that I could if an emergency arose or I needed help with something. Having worked under the "other structure," many central people would call and tell me I had to do something. It is difficult to manage your school when you have to answer to many bosses.

Another respondent who also affirmed the autonomy that the current communication structure allowed stated, "Either the superintendent responds to my queries or he directs me to someone else who finds the answers. He has given advice but doesn't command. His questions have caused me to respond with significant reflection."

Many principals reported that the flattened governance structure of the school district allowed them greater accessibility to the superintendent. Frequent responses included the following: "It is positive for me to only have one person to report to," and "it is easy for me to access the superintendent directly." Other respondents commented, "When I need to discuss my school with the superintendent, I can do it without having a filtered version passed on," and "I can pick up the phone and talk to the superintendent. This cuts down on some of the bureaucracy."

Several respondents noted that the ability to have unfiltered, direct access to the superintendent had positively influenced their work in schools. A respondent commented on the perceived benefits of this unfiltered access:

> I can, and do, speak directly to the superintendent—messages are not filtered. There is a predictable network of information sources that we know about and understand how to access. A number of monitoring tools are in place to ensure the superintendent is well informed. Immediate access is there should there be a need to contact him.

Several principals highly valued the fact that the current structure allowed them to speak directly to the superintendent rather than having to communicate through an associate. Some of the principals affirmed that reduced layers in the governance allowed critical decisions to be made in a much shorter timeframe. A respondent summed up this sentiment: "The current system allows less direct communication with an associate who

may interpret information differently than intended." Another commented, "I get to talk directly to my boss; I do not have to go through an associate superintendent first."

Timeliness of the Response

Several respondents addressed the need for a timely response from the superintendent, especially when they requested feedback from him. In their comments on this topic, they also affirmed the value of autonomy of operation, often in the same sentence. For example, the comments of one respondent in particular reflected the sentiments of many of his colleagues: "Issues that are critical can be communicated and responded to in a timely manner. I feel my professional expertise is respected and the superintendent has confidence in me. All the information is expedient."

Many participants used one- or two-word descriptors for the speed with which critical information is moved throughout the district, such as *quickly* and *timely*. One response echoed many of the comments in this area: "It is normal to get a response to an inquiry within 24 hours." Another respondent stated, "If I need to speak directly to the superintendent, I know he will make himself available."

Openness of the Communication Structure

A number of principals referred to the system as open and responsive to their needs. A respondent effectively summarized many of his colleagues' comments in this area: "I can speak openly and honestly to all. I feel I can contact the superintendent directly and that he will respond. Our district has been very responsive to the schools and the vehicle is the open communication we have."

To a lesser extent, the principals commented positively not only on their ability to be open in their conversations with the superintendent, but also on the comfort level of these conversations: "I feel comfortable making an appointment or phoning the

superintendent," and "I get a good feeling speaking directly to the boss." Equally important is the perception that the superintendent felt comfortable in communicating with the principals. A respondent summarized several of the other comments: "We are free to communicate with the superintendent personally at any time; superintendent communicates back in the same free manner."

Assistants to the Superintendent

Several of the principals raised one particular topic—the role of assistants to the superintendent in the communication process. Generally, they believed that the role had the potential to positively enhance communication procedures. However, a lack of clarity on the relationship between the stated role and the actual role of assistants to the superintendent was having a negative influence. The perceptions of the principals on this topic were captured in the following comment:

> The appointment of assistants to the superintendent has the potential to improve communication. Their positions will be value-added over time as they begin to understand the content of each school and become familiar with each principal's strengths, gifts and talents.

Another respondent, although commenting more positively, at the same time acknowledged the lack of clarity on the role of assistants to the superintendent:

> I find I have greater ease and ability to communicate to the assistant to the superintendent who visits my school. Having an assistant who comes out to the school is reasonable in keeping open communication, as long as it very clear to whom we report.

The comments reflected the participants' perception that communication with the assistants on a personal level was generally effective, particularly in connection with school operations. In that regard, the principals believed that the assistants, who had visited their schools on a number of occasions, had a better understanding of school

needs as a result. Many principals acknowledged the comfort with which they communicated with the assistants; for example, "I am fortunate to have an 'assistant to the superintendent' that I respect and feel comfortable communicating with."

As I acknowledged earlier and have repeatedly referred to in this section of the responses, a wider and more mixed range of perceptions continually emerged as the principals discussed the role of assistants within the context of an intermediary communication link between them and the superintendent. One comment was, "The 'link' through the assistant to the superintendent is very effective. I can always reach whoever I need to (superintendent or assistant) in a timely manner." At the same time, the principals wanted to make it clear that the assistants were supposed to play a supporting role in the communication process and not a reporting or directing role. Within this context, several principals expressed the concern that a role shift appeared to be in the imminent, a shift that had not been acknowledged or discussed in a formal manner.

Superintendent's Council

Another aspect of EPSB's communication structure that garnered general support was the role of the Superintendent's Council. Many of the comments in this area came from principals who acknowledged that they had served on the council at some point in their career. The data indicate that their relationships with central staff members while they served on the council greatly enhanced the staff members' ability to provide feedback in both formal and informal settings. As one respondent stated:

> Being on Superintendent's Council provided an opportunity for me to get to know central office staff in both professional and personal level. This setting creates opportunities for open discussion and allows us to provide feedback. Engaging in dialogue with various levels of the organization enhances understanding of the role each play in the education process.

Other principals commented more specifically on the role of the Superintendent's Council in terms of supporting the communication process. Many principals suggested that the council's role within a flattened governance structure was to provide a forum to give principals an opportunity to directly influence decision making within the district. A respondent explained: "I believe that there are good intentions associated with decentralized management within the district. The superintendent makes efforts towards gathering information from senior administration through Superintendent's Council."

Other Observations

A number of principals chose to comment more generally on the structure as a whole although the questionnaire had asked them to identify positive aspects of the current communication structure. They believed that the structure allowed for two-way communication, but that the current communication structure diminished their influence rather than enhanced their ability to provide input. Comments such as "I don't believe that I greatly influence decisions in the district. It seems that there is a movement towards centralization," and "School administrators generally have more latitude in decision making. Recently, however, that latitude has been dwindling with the level of accountability rising from both the district and the province" illustrate the common belief that the district's communication structure is moving in a new, more centralized direction.

A respondent who did not intend to be overcritical of the communication structure as a whole stated, "I think we have the structure in place and I think the potential is there but there is a need for some tweaking." Another acknowledged the difficulty of communicating within a flattened hierarchy: "Reporting directly to the superintendent is good in theory but very dependent upon his or her ability to handle this type of structure,

connection with her principals, and willingness to listen. Good in theory—less good in practice."

Concerns about the perception that the district had revised the central office structure without any discussion with principals—specifically as it related to the addition of assistants to the superintendent—also drew commentary. A respondent summed up the related comments of several colleagues: "When I communicate directly, I know the answer is from the superintendent and not someone in his office. However, increasingly I feel others are more often speaking on his behalf and direct communication is not occurring."

Suggestions to Improve the Communication Structure

In an effort to explore the complexities of a large-scale communication structure in more detail, the questionnaire invited the principals to make recommendations for improvement, and 76 responded. Although their comments covered a variety of areas, the following broad themes emerged from the data: role clarification: assistants to the superintendent, communication media, and trust.

Role Clarification: Assistants to the Superintendent

Over the past decade the principals within the district have been clearly identified as members of senior staff. Their unique position within the governance structure has not only been reflected in district language, but also published widely, internally and externally, in district writings and media presentations. Along with that designation came the perception that principals, who report directly to the superintendent, were serving not only as school-based administrators, but also in an advisory role to the superintendent.

As the data indicate, the principals' perceptions of their role as senior staff members point to the belief that the role was in a state of transition. One respondent's

views echoed those of several of her colleagues: "There seems to be a growing bureaucracy in the district that is creating layers between the superintendent and principals. If we are to remain decentralized, efforts must be made to limit this trend." Another respondent expressed a similar concern: "I do not feel that principals are currently treated as senior staff. There are far too many administrators being placed downtown who serve as 'senior staff' above the rest of us who are treated more like middle management." The majority of comments on this topic reflect the concern that "I don't believe we are 'senior staff.' . . . I believe we are middle management and have little influence on district decisions."

The manner in which requests from the superintendent's office were communicated to principals further exacerbated the confusion about their role as members of senior staff:

> Over the past 2-3 years, there are more and more individuals downtown sending e-mails, etc., asking principals for various things or directing principals to do certain things. These are not from the superintendent. I have always believed that I report directly to the superintendent, yet lately I seem to be responding more and more to other senior staff.

Several principals reported that the changes were having a negative influence on their communications with central office personnel; for example, "I prefer to communicate directly to the superintendent. Another layer of administration just muddies the waters, and the superintendent is not aware of issues with principals in schools." Although several principals raised this as an issue, not all shared this view. Several principals acknowledged perceived problems associated with the lack of role definition within the current structure, but added that it is not reasonable for principals to expect that the superintendent would communicate directly with them on a regular basis.

This particular aspect of the reporting structure—the role confusion over the addition of assistants to the superintendent—particularly as it related to their role in district communications, appeared to be causing the greatest concern. As one respondent commented:

> There seems to be confusion about the role of assistants to the superintendent. We have gone from an associate superintendent structure to Superintendent's Council with elected representatives where principals were seen and felt to be part of senior staff, to a system with appointed representatives to Superintendent's Council—which gives rise to the question, who do they represent, the person who appointed them, or the group they are purported to represent? Assistants to the superintendent are not supposed to be line positions but, increasingly, seem to have duties and functions that would suggest they are in fact filling a line position. Who does one report to, the superintendent or the assistant?

Along with concerns about a perceived change in the reporting structure came an acknowledgement of the difficulties that one person faced in attempting to communicate effectively with all 202 principals: "If assistants to the superintendent are to be effective, their role needs to be clarified. It is unrealistic for one superintendent to be aware of or knowledgeable about 200 schools." Another respondent further acknowledged the complexities associated with the current structure:

> It is impossible for the superintendent to have direct communication with 200+ principals under the present structure. However, placing 'middlemen' between him and the principals is blocking any attempts from principals to communicate directly with him. One can imagine more personal contact at the level of the assistants to the superintendent; on the other hand, there is no particular desire to return to the days of the associates. Perhaps a broadening of the 'assistants to' layer to include someone in a role dealing specifically with elementary schools with 200 or fewer students or some other broad category would allow for increased personal contact with someone 'in the know.'

Several principals suggested that EPSB's communication structure could be positively influenced by clarifying the role of the assistants to the superintendent: "If senior staff now refers to assistants to the superintendent, then that needs to be clarified.

If our first avenue of communication is to call the assistants to the superintendent then we need to know that," and "The communication structure could be positively enhanced by clarifying whether the role of assistants is supporting or reporting."

Other principals viewed the strengthening of the assistant's role as having the potential to increase support from central office. A respondent commented on this position: "I would like a supervisor with whom I can have closer contact. The present structure does not permit the superintendent to truly know what is happening in my school." Other principals concurred: "We need an intermediate level of 'assistant' or 'associate' that we report to so that they will have a real knowledge base of particular school issues." Another respondent went a step further: "I would like to see the assistants more directly involved in schools and available to principals. Put back associate superintendents."

Other principals offered specific recommendations related to the role of assistants: "Increase the number of assistants to the superintendent so as to reduce the number of schools each carry." Several principals identified a disconnect between the current stated theoretical practice and actual practice. According to the respondents' understanding of district theory and philosophy, assistants played a supporting role. However, the principals tended to view the current role in a different context—more as a reporting role. Although in the minority, a few principals appeared to support the perceived shift. A respondent summarized their views:

> Move the assistants to the superintendent to a different level in the organizational chart between the superintendent and principals so that decisions are possible in short order when necessary and to increase access. Maintain the option of direct access to the superintendent when required.

Communication Media

The media that the district uses to communicate direction or information directly from the superintendent attracted several comments. Although the comments touched on a number of media devices, the majority of the comments were related to three specific areas: the Superintendent's Memorandum, SELT, and, to a lesser extent, e-mail.

Superintendent's memorandum. With respect to the Superintendent's Memorandum, the majority of comments reflected the belief that the Memorandum was no longer a direct communication medium from the superintendent to principals. The principals contended that the Superintendent's Memorandum had become a broad-ranging communication device that, as one respondent complained, "has lost its potential to serve as a direct conveyance of information; critical information that is required for the efficient operation of schools." The memorandum, according to another principal, "is too full of trivial stuff."

The comments on the Superintendent's Memorandum revealed confusion over its purpose. Some principals viewed it as a medium designed to highlight events and opportunities that occur within the district as a whole, and others considered it a direct communication link from the superintendent to school-based administrators. This lack of clarity, the principals charged, was causing the memorandum "to be treated with less attention than it deserves."

Several principals suggested that the rationale for the Superintendent's Memorandum be revisited to ensure that it was still meeting the needs of school personnel. They believed that the information it provided was meaningful, but they also considered the information scattered and not always directly relevant to their work. Consequently, they tended to downplay the urgency of reading the memorandum in a

timely manner. As one principal stated, "We don't have time to sort through all the information in order to pick out those items that are essential to the operation of our respective schools." Another commented, "I would prefer a weekly information sheet/ timelines/important dates/memorandum type format from the superintendent. It would assist us in meeting multiple demands and keeping up with timelines." Another principal made a similar comment:

> Have a memorandum sent out weekly to principals that deals specifically with information that is from the superintendent; information that the principals need to know, along with deadlines. The current superintendent's memorandum does have valuable information but is often too general in content.

As I reported earlier, the principals believed that a direct and weekly operational communication link between the superintendent and principals had merit. However, they also thought that the current use of the Superintendent's Memorandum as a district newsletter had diluted its value to the point where the medium was being treated in a very casual manner at the school level.

SELT. The other communication medium that drew several comments in this section of the questionnaire was SELT. Many respondents affirmed the value of gathering all principals on a monthly basis. However, they also maintained that SELT had stepped away from its original purpose, which was to develop a forum to allow principals to meet directly with the superintendent and be given not only critical operational information, but also an opportunity to seek clarification of district initiatives as required.

The principals who commented on this area expressed a concern with the current structure of SELT. A respondent summarized the views of several of his colleagues: "We should continue with the monthly SELT meetings but make them more relevant to our

work as principals." Much of the concern centered on the belief that SELT was purely a device to disseminate information of a general nature: "SELT may be a good format to communicate important information. However, we need more opportunities to process and discuss new and important directives in a post-SELT vertical setting." Much of the information currently provided in SELT "can be delivered by e-mail."

An additional item of concern was the attendance of representatives of groups other than principals at the monthly meetings, such as the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) and school board trustees. The principals tended to view SELT as a vehicle for direct communication between the superintendent and principals. Some principals argued that the inclusion of other groups tended to "hamper the free flow of communication" and thereby had the potential to have a negative influence on the superintendent's ability to be open. To improve upon the current structure, one respondent suggested that the superintendent consider organizing "principals 'only' meetings with the superintendent and assistants. Trustees and union representatives (ATA) in attendance can influence the conversations at SELT."

The principals also believed that the current format did not provide opportunities for them to provide input or seek clarification on topics raised in SELT. A respondent acknowledged concerns about the lack of opportunity to engage in two-way dialogue within the SELT format: "The superintendent should develop additional opportunities or vehicles that will provide principals with opportunities to provide feedback rather than just receive straight information in SELT." Another respondent echoed the views of many of his colleagues and recommended "more scheduled small-group meetings with the superintendent, in addition to SELT or within the SELT format, which will provide him with more opportunities to receive unfiltered information."

The monthly SELT meeting normally consisted of two parts: a large-group session that the superintendent led almost in its entirety and smaller-group discussions frequently guided by issues raised in the first part of the meeting. Over the years the post-SELT sessions had been organized in a variety of formations by division or vertically within a geographic zone. The principals affirmed the value of these small-group meetings. However, a number raised concerns about how SELT is currently organized, which seems to indicate that the purpose for post-SELT meetings has become less clear over the past few years. Their common belief was that post-SELT had moved from being a forum to clarify information from the large-group SELT meeting to a meeting that was largely disconnected from topics raised in SELT. A respondent observed, "SELT may be a good format to communicate important information. However, we need more opportunities to process and discuss new and important directives in post-SELT meetings."

E-mail. A significant number of principals also touched upon the use of e-mail. Although no one provided specific recommendations in this area, a number indicated that they were being overwhelmed by the number of e-mails they received on a daily basis. The large volume of e-mail from all areas of central district operations was reducing its effectiveness as a district communication medium. As one respondent stated, "Given the large volume of e-mail we receive on a daily basis, it is easy to forget or ignore; other avenues of communication need to be explored."

In summary, the principals acknowledged the complexities that resulted from a large number of principals reporting directly to one superintendent. Their comments reflect an understanding that it is impossible for the superintendent to make regular visits to all schools or engage in face-to-face communication with each principal on a frequent

basis. However, many stated that other forms of communication needed to be explored to ensure that each principal has one or two direct encounters with the superintendent per school year. The recommendations to accommodate direct contact ranged from the superintendent's "initiat[ing] phone contact with the principals at least twice a year" to "mak[ing] more regular visits to respondent support groups."

Issues of Trust

The participants frequently mentioned the issue of trust in responding to the questions on the perceived effectiveness of the district communication structure. More specifically, trust that communications to and from the superintendent were being treated with the appropriate level of respect was a recurring theme in several of the responses. A number of the issues raised in relation to this theme coalesced around two very specific themes: correspondence that originated in the superintendent's office that was directed at principals and the solicitation and use of feedback.

Correspondence: Superintendent to principals. With regard to correspondence that originated in the superintendent's office, a number of principals voiced a concern that someone else in the organization was constructing and sending an increasing amount of correspondence bearing the signature of the superintendent, and the principals, who considered themselves senior staff, found this procedure problematic. In that role they expected that the superintendent would personally produce correspondence bearing his signature.

One respondent's comment resonated with those of several others: "Do not send out e-mails with the superintendent's name on them if they are NOT from him directly." Another respondent summarized the comments of several colleagues in that the district needs to "ensure that the superintendent is aware and reads all e-mails that are written by

others, but which have his name attached." According to the participants, their perceptions of the origination of e-mail were violating their understanding of the direct reporting relationship between them and the superintendent.

Decision-making input. Several principals concurred that they had opportunities to share input. However, they also expressed concerns with how the input was used or, in many of the respondents' opinion, not used. Equally prevalent in the responses was a perception that district decisions were frequently made without the solicitation of input from those affected by the decision.

The lack of trust related to the solicitation and use of input was rooted in the principals' belief that as members of senior staff they would be consulted prior to major decisions being made: "The purpose or whole picture sometimes needs to be shared before directing staff to comply. People need time to process and figure out why. A rationale for the decision needs to be clearly communicated." Another stated, "Most principals agree with district philosophy and decisions, but would like to feel they have more input in making it a reality. They need to feel they are trusted to make the right decisions."

Many principals supported district direction generally but raised concerns because they had not had sufficient opportunities to provide input into developing the district vision. A respondent asserted that the district should "gather and act upon feedback from principals. Imposing a district vision may be a positive step. However, it limits the value derived from diversity. Loyalty and pride are not always generated by a vision which precludes informed alternatives."

Several principals stated that differences of opinion, particularly with regard to district direction and vision, should be encouraged. A respondent reflected on the perceived intolerance for differences of opinion:

> Differences of opinion need to be valued and encouraged; otherwise, principals will stay quiet even if they have valuable information to contribute. This goes against developing as powerful a team as we could have—trust levels need to be increased.

A respondent summarized the responses of other principals: "There is a need for feedback from the masses; they need to be truly heard."

Other Observations/Recommendations

The questionnaire asked the principles to add comments, and 54 chose to comment on a wide variety of topics relevant to EPSB's communication structure. The following topics were covered in the information collected in response to the first two questions. The comments on the communication structure grouped around a variety of subtopics such as governance structure, role clarification, clarity of purpose, message transmission, access to the superintendent, and trust.

Governance Structure

Opinions on whether the structure of EPSB enhanced or inhibited communication flow were divided. A number of principals expressed a fear that any change in the structure would negatively influence their ability to access the superintendent directly. One respondent's comment mirrored those of several colleagues:

> I fear that providing assistants to the superintendent (executive directors) with more supervisory duties will morph us back into the old associate superintendent model. I know that the assistants to the superintendent are needed to help reduce the work load for the superintendent. However, if something is important enough for me to want to bring it to the superintendent, then I want to talk to him directly.

Several principals believed that the district had already returned to a traditional structure. One observed:

> It appears that in the past few years the district has returned to a structure similar to having associate superintendents though they are now referred to as assistants to the superintendent. I am not nearly so confident anymore that we have a flattened organization.

Another respondent acknowledged the complexities of communication in large-scale operations but was unsure about which structure was the most effective:

> My experience with other boards has been that the greater the number of administrators there are, the more difficult it is to know whom to contact or where to go for support. On the other hand, the flattened organization has left a few individuals responsible for large swaths of administrative duties—much of the support that can be given, and needed, is weakened.

Other principals openly expressed concern about any move to reestablish a traditional governance structure. A respondent summed up their sentiments: "I much prefer a single superintendent rather than layers of additional bureaucrats and their assistants and their managers and their secretaries."

Role Clarification

Clarification of the role of assistants to the superintendent in the communication process and the principals' perceptions of their role as senior staff garnered several comments in this section. Many reiterated their belief that they were no longer members of senior staff and therefore were not having any influence on district decision making: "Sometimes I feel as though our input is not wanted or valued. I no longer feel like I am a member of senior staff," and "Senior staff—not sure of terminology—are we senior staff along with those working beside the superintendent or are they at a higher level? How are we supposed to communicate with them, reporting, sharing or both?" Other principals

expressed the opinion that *senior staff* now refers to the assistants to the superintendent and wondered what their own role as school-based administrators was in the communication process. A respondent stated, "I believe there has been a shift in the communication structure. I am not sure principals are considered senior staff."

The lack of clarity on the specific role of assistants to the superintendent caused the principals to feel more distanced from the superintendent. A respondent commented on the concern about the lack of role clarity: "With assistants to the superintendent, Leadership Services, Superintendent's Council and now Student Achievement, we have created various levels in the organization; all communicating with the principals. Increasingly, principals are feeling more distanced from the superintendent." Another noted, "Current operations may cause the more cynical administrators to believe the assistants do more than advise."

As the following comments show, the principals generally accepted the changing role of the assistants: "The strength of support from the superintendent's office is directly related to the effectiveness of the immediate circle of administrators in senior positions working closely with him. In our particular situation, the clarity of those roles is lacking."

Clarity on the Decision-Making Process

A number of principals expressed concern about the perceived lack of clarity in the district's decision-making process. A common perception was that major district decisions were frequently being made without their direct involvement. They were also concerned that when they were asked to provide input, it was not heeded or seriously considered in the decision-making process. Although this theme did not appear in the responses as a stand-alone item, it emerged repeatedly in the responses related to other aspects of the communication structure. One remark reflected the perceptions of the

decision-making process: "Greater transparency around internal decisions is required." Another respondent commented on the use of solicited input: "Currently a lot of information is collected from principals, yet purpose or outcome is sometimes/often unclear."

Superintendent's Council

Concern about a lack of clarity, particularly related to the district's decision-making processes, extended beyond principal and superintendent interactions. The Superintendent's Council, a body originally organized for the purposes of soliciting feedback directly from principals, attracted a large number of comments, most of which revealed the concern that the data that they were providing through this network were not being fully used to inform district decision making:

> There is limited real communication with anyone in senior administration apart from input received through representatives at Superintendent's Council. What happens to the information received at Superintendent's Council is a mystery, as there is rarely any follow-up to issues raised.

Another respondent commented on the role of Superintendent's Council in the communication process: "Superintendent's Council representatives are great. However, I am not sure that our input is heard."

Message Transmission

The district media used to communicate with principals also garnered a number of comments. In most cases they reflected the concern that district e-mail is being used so extensively that it had lost its ability to be an effective means of communication: "The use of e-mail in the district is generally effective but it is also an extreme overload of information. I am not sure this is making things better."

The principals were concerned not only about the perceived overuse of e-mail, but also about the number of tasks that were frequently associated with the transmissions, coupled with the assumption that everyone has all the information required to take the appropriate action:

> There is an enormous amount of information that goes out by e-mail. The reading is overwhelming; there are usually so many agendas attached, in many cases, much of the information required to complete the task is information that some senior staff (principals) are not privy to.

A number of principals believed that the use of e-mail was becoming somewhat overwhelming and that ease of access had created less thoughtful correspondence. In the process, it "had created a complex and unproductive communication process."

Access to Information

Although it was not identified as a major issue, a number of respondents expressed a concern that some principals had greater access to district information than others. One respondent echoed numerous others with regard to the communication structure: "All principals need to be kept in the loop—benefit from district information beyond a "need to know" level—currently some principals seem to have more access to information."

Communication Structures

A final issue with regard to message transmission was the number of structures currently being use to transmit messages: "District communications has become very scattered with directives coming from all directions." Generally, the comments in this area revealed the belief that the district communication structure needed to be reviewed in an effort to develop a system that would provide information deemed essential to the operation of schools in a more controlled and specific manner.

Communication Link: Principals to Superintendent

In the open section, a few principals acknowledged the complexities of communicating in a large district, but believed that access to the superintendent was becoming somewhat restricted: "I do not believe we have direct access to the superintendent. Most inquiries are redirected to someone else in the superintendent's area or to another department."

A number of principals discussed issues of access that more specifically related to the themes covered in other sections. Perceptions of the ease of access were somewhat divided. Many principals indicated that they could easily access the superintendent whenever they required access, yet they also said that they rarely do. In many cases the comments on access pointed to the belief that the "superintendent trusts them to do their job and, as such, [they] do not feel compelled to report directly to the superintendent on an ongoing basis."

A number of principals also believed that more frequent visits from the superintendent would increase his understanding of the issues that school-based administrators face. One respondent echoed the views of many of his colleagues: "Even one visit per year from the superintendent would show staff and principals that he is interested and aware of what is going on in the school."

Open-Ended Responses: Trust

Finally, in the open section the principals once again raised the issue of trust, which I have discussed in other areas of the questionnaire results. Their comments reveal both positive and critical perceptions. On the positive side, one respondent captured most of the other principals' sentiment: "I have always appreciated the positive manner with

which requests, suggestions and reminders have been forwarded. I have always felt that I was a respected and a valuable member of the district."

Another issue of trust that seemed to be problematic for many of the respondents was the perception that someone else in the organization was producing e-mail that they received under the superintendent's name: "E-mail communications may not always be forwarded to him and the reply may come from someone else who sends it under the superintendent's name."

As I indicated earlier, a number of principals complained that the current communication structure could leave the impression that principals cannot be trusted to make the right decisions when they are called upon to do so. Other principals suggested that adding a layer of bureaucracy between the principals and the superintendent was not necessary, particularly if it was an attempt to lessen the superintendent's workload. In that regard, they asserted that they could be trusted not to overwhelm the superintendent with unnecessary contact:

> A level of trust has to be developed where the superintendent feels that principals will contact him "directly" only when they feel a need to do so, and it will not be over trivial issues; however, all principals must feel they have access to the superintendent, even if the majority of them never activate or employ that access.

Summary of Questionnaire Data

Statistical Data Summary

An analysis of the questionnaire data revealed that principals rarely engage in direct communication with the superintendent. When they do communicate directly with him or he communicates directly with them, e-mail is the medium of choice. With regard to their level of satisfaction with the level of communication flow to and from the superintendent, in spite of the low reported use of direct communication, the participants

reported fairly high levels of satisfaction not only with their ability to communicate directly with the superintendent when the need to do so arose, but also with the timeliness of his response to their queries. The principals also expressed high levels of satisfaction with their ability to be open in their communication with the superintendent and their ability to provide input into district decision making, albeit indirectly, through their representative on the Superintendent's Council.

The responses also surfaced a number of modifiers on their reported levels of satisfaction. For example, the questionnaire asked the principals to categorize the degree to which they believed direct access to the superintendent assisted them in carrying out their role as site-based administrators. In response, 61.5% reported a moderate to high level of satisfaction. The questionnaire also asked the principals to rate the effectiveness of the communication link between them and the superintendent. In response, 73.1% indicated it was effective to very effective. Conversely, when asked how frequently they communicated with the superintendent, 67.3% reported that they rarely communicated with the superintendent. The level of satisfaction dropped slightly when they were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with the number of opportunities provided to have direct input into district policy making decisions, with 53.8% providing a satisfied to very satisfied rating. Finally, when asked to rate the degree to which the appointment of the assistants to the superintendent had improved communication between them and the superintendent's office, 51% provided no response and 32.7% reported a moderate to high degree. As I reported earlier, the questionnaire participants also provided additional data in response to questions posed in an open-ended format.

Positive Aspects of the Communication Structure

In this section 85 participants commented on the positive aspects of EPSB's communication structure. Although the responses touched on a wide variety of topics, the accessibility of the superintendent, the openness of the communication structure, the involvement of the assistants to the superintendent in the communication process, and the Superintendent's Council captured the most comments. To a lesser extent, the principals commented positively on other aspects of the communication structure that they believed afforded them the ability to communicate directly with the superintendent as senior members of the EPSB administrative team.

Governance/Communication Structure

In an effort to explore in more detail the complexities of communicating within a large-scale communication structure, the questionnaire invited the principals to add general comments and recommendations for improvement, and 76 did so. The comments covered a variety of areas, but the following broad themes emerged from the data: organizational structure, role ambiguity, trust, and communication medium (Table 1).

Organizational structure. The respondents recommended that the district consider examining the current span of control to ensure that it allows an appropriate flow of operational information at all levels of district administration. More specifically, the respondents believed that the reporting lines needed to be clarified because the current lack of clarity had created high levels of dissatisfaction and inhibited the flow of critical information throughout the district.

Table 1

Summary of Open-Ended Responses

Governance/communication structure	Open-ended responses
Organizational structure	• Flattened structure had created expectations for direct involvement in district decision-making • Principals believed that communication processes designed to facilitate direct participation in district decision-making were not being utilized in the manner in which they were designed • Perceived changes to organizational structure and district communication processes have negatively influenced principals' perception of the effectiveness of district communications • Principals believed the district's large span of control may not allow for a sufficient flow of critical information to and from the superintendent
Role ambiguity	• The lack of clarity regarding the role of principals (senior district leaders) and the role of assistants to the superintendent (supporting versus directing) has negatively influenced principals' perception of the effectiveness of district communications
Trust	• Principals believed opportunities to participate in district decision-making processes have diminished • This belief had created a perception that their input may not be desired • Role ambiguity had created issues of trust, particularly as it related to the role of assistants to the superintendent • Operating with a belief that they were in a direct communication link with the superintendent, principals believed the practice was eroded when someone other than the superintendent responded to correspondence purportedly to be from the superintendent

Governance/communication structure	Open-ended responses
Communication media	• Principals believed that media designed specifically to facilitate a direct communication link to and from the superintendent within a flattened governance structure, were not operating at their full potential • The overuse of e-mail had negatively influenced the medium's ability to be considered a primary vehicle for district communications

Role ambiguity. The respondents contended that the role of principals, particularly their role of senior leaders in the district structure, needed to be clarified. The title implies that they were serving in an advisory role to the superintendent. However, their perception was that the role had changed, and they were no longer considered senior leaders.

The principals also believed that the role of assistant to the superintendent (executive director) needed to be clarified. The district's stated position in this role was one of support. However, the principals contended that there was a disconnect between the stated and the actual role and that the lack of clarity created a blockage in the flow of district communication up and down the structure.

Communication structures and trust. According to the respondents, the following conditions had created an environment that negatively affected their trust in the communication processes: (a) Opportunities to provide input into district decision-making processes had been significantly reduced, (b) input that was solicited and offered was not being used, (c) decisions were being made prior to the solicitation of that input, and (d) professional criticism/feedback was not encouraged.

Communication structures and media richness. The respondents charged that (a) district communications had become scattered, (b) that directives and communication were coming from all directions, and (c) that the district's communication structures and processes, which had been implemented to facilitate a direct communication flow between the superintendent and the principals, were no longer functioning effectively.

This chapter included a summary of the responses to the questionnaire that all EPSB principals received. I explored the themes that emerged from the data more fully in follow-up interviews with a selected group of respondents, and their responses are summarized in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5

RESEARCH FINDINGS: INTERVIEW DATA

The Participants

As I reported earlier, I distributed a volunteer form (Appendix C) with the questionnaire to ask the principals to participate in the interview portion of the study. Thirty-three principals, who represented assignments in all divisions, completed and returned the form.

Because of the large number of principals who volunteered to participate in the interview segment, I easily achieved a division and gender balance in selecting the participants. I used information from the volunteer form, coupled with personal knowledge of the principals and their assignments, to select principals whom I believed would be willing to participate at the level that I deemed necessary to gain an in-depth understanding of their perceptions of the district communication processes. I selected two male and two female principals from each of the three divisions. The demographics of the principals are as follows: two male and two female high school principals, one male and one female in junior high school principal assignments, one male and one female in K–9 assignments, and two male and two female elementary school principals.

From February 2006 to May 2006, I conducted interviews that lasted approximately 1.5 hours with each of the 12 principals in their respective schools. These locations were purely for convenience. Although I gave the principals the option of choosing a different location when I contacted them, they all chose their own schools.

The interview format consisted of semi structured questions that gave the participants an opportunity to extend their answers beyond the questions that I posed. I

asked them to comment specifically on their interpretation of the themes that emerged from the responses to the questionnaire.

With the permission of the participants, I taped all of the interviews. At the beginning of each interview, I reminded the participants that I would maintain the confidentiality of the data that I would collect.

As I outlined in the methodology chapter, I summarized and analyzed the data by repeatedly listening to the tapes, which allowed me to reflect more fully on the emerging themes and their implications for the answers to the questions under study. For this reason I did not prepare verbatim transcripts of each interview. However, as I replayed the interviews, I transcribed, grouped, and arranged selected responses within each theme to inform the findings from the questionnaire. I believe that transcribing selected portions of the interviews within thematic contexts gave me an in-depth understanding of the emerging and relevant themes.

Data Collection

Comparing the responses by gender, age, and assignment by categorizing the themes and comments did not reveal any major differences in the themes that emerged from the interviews with the high school principals and those with their colleagues at the elementary and junior high levels; however, the high school principals' responses were generally more detailed than those of their colleagues.

Experience

The school-based administrative experience of the interview participants ranged from 2 to 18 years. None of the principals reported experience as a school-based administrator in another jurisdiction.

Interview Introduction

In an effort to illuminate themes from the questionnaire responses and provide a focus for the interviews, I gave the participants a summary of the data that I had collected from the questionnaire portion of the study prior to commencing the interviews. I presented the data as follows: (a) an overview of the responses to the questions that asked the principals to rate their level of direct communication with the superintendent, (b) their levels of satisfaction with the district's communication processes, and (c) the four themes that emerged from the open-ended responses. I encouraged the participants to ask questions for clarification during the presentation of the data.

Principals' Observations on the Statistical Data

I asked the principals to comment on the data from the questionnaires, and they affirmed that were highly satisfied with the method and timeliness of the responses from the superintendent, especially when he was responding to communication that they had initiated. The interview participants also affirmed their responses in the questionnaires in which they suggested that the current communication structure had the potential for an adequate level of information flow between them and the superintendent.

When I asked the principals to explain the apparent contradiction between their reported perceptions of general satisfaction with district communication processes as a whole, yet dissatisfaction with the actual level of direct communication flow to and from the superintendent, they explained that the philosophy behind the current communication structure had created certain expectations for frequent and direct involvement in district decision making. They believed that they were expected to provide input and, as I mentioned earlier, that the current communication structure had the potential to provide them with opportunities to do so. Furthermore, they expected to be listened to seriously

when they offered input. However, they also contended that their expectations for involvement and communication were not being met within the current climate. The principals categorized the issues that created the current climate into four themes: role ambiguity, organizational structure, media effectiveness, and trust. The questions that I posed later in the interviews reflected the interrelatedness of these themes.

Frequency of Direct Communication With the Superintendent

I asked the interview participants to quantify their level of direct communication with the superintendent, and they all reported that they rarely engaged in direct communication. An elementary school principal summarized the position of the majority of the participants: "I am not dissatisfied with the amount of direct communication. I believe if something is urgent I will hear from the superintendent." Another elementary principal echoed the comments of several colleagues: "I generally don't communicate with the Super because I haven't any reason to. I have only communicated directly with the superintendent once in four years, by direct phone call, and that was at my request."

Although the participants generally rarely engaged in direct communication with the superintendent, they believed that they could do so if the need arose. As one junior high school principal stated, "I am confident that I can communicate directly if the need arises. I don't need daily communication to understand that he has confidence in me." The high school principals reported slightly more frequent direct communication with the superintendent than did their colleagues at the junior high and elementary levels. One high school principal's comment was similar to those of his high school colleagues: "I speak with the superintendent probably once a month. I know that I can e-mail him if I have a problem. I tend not to seek the counsel or direction of the superintendent very often but believe I can get it if I need it." Although the high school principals reported

more direct communication with the superintendent, they also carefully underplayed the frequency with which that direct communication occurred. Their comments reveal their belief that their role of site-based administrators gave them a high level of decision-making autonomy. Consequently, they did not seek out or desire additional opportunities to engage in frequent direct communication with the superintendent.

Role of Principals as Senior Leaders in the Communication Structure

The questionnaire responses identified confusion about the role of principals as senior leaders and prompted a question on their perceptions specifically on the district's communication structure. They unanimously agreed that they perceived a role shift, and one elementary principal commented, "I think there has been a change over the past few years; I don't believe we are senior leaders. That is the role of the executive directors." Another elementary school principal stated, "Identifying me as a senior administrator is a bit of a misnomer." The same principal acknowledged the complexities of principals as senior leaders reporting directly to the superintendent: "The difficult part is there are more than 200 members of the so-called senior leadership team, with a variety of ideas as to where we should be going. It is more words than reality."

Other participants viewed their role as more autonomous within the district reporting and communication structure and suggested that, in that capacity, they had the ability to exercise more senior leadership, but only at the school level. A high school principal explained: "I believe that site-based management gives us opportunities to demonstrate leadership to our superintendent that would allow us to be viewed as senior management. However, I don't think our language aligns with our current practice."

When I asked the principals to comment specifically on the impact of their role of senior leaders on the district communication structure, they expressed the concern that

they did not have an effective vehicle that presented them with sufficient opportunities to provide direct and meaningful input into the district's decision-making process. The majority of the interview participants believed, as an elementary school principal said, that "there are some opportunities for input, but most of the time we don't know how we influence decision making." A high school principal discussed what he considered an effective process for providing input in past years: "I think there was a time when we were truly senior leaders. The structure met the words, and Superintendent's Council was different then. Recommendations and issues came to the table and were debated heavily. Principals had influence."

Role Ambiguity: Effects on the Communication Structure

The questionnaire results also indicated that the lack of clarity on the role of executive directors was negatively influencing district communications. The participants acknowledged the complexities of communicating within a large organization, but were concerned that the district's language did not reflect actual practice. They generally perceived a shift in the executive director role from one of support to a more directive role.

An elementary school principal contended that "the lack of clarity around the role of executive directors is causing distortion in the communication channel." This principal's claim reflected others' belief that the shift in practice was a direct result of an external audit: "I think the executive director layer came out of Alberta Education believing that the superintendent cannot monitor 203 schools." Another elementary principal stated, "The extra layer of executive director, without a clarification of the role, is creating a communication block. Who are we reporting to? Am I talking to the super when I talk to them?"

Several interview participants were interested in discussing the origins of the flattened structure (in a comparative manner). A high school principal provided the context for comments on the current communication structure with regard to the executive directors:

> We used to have direct communication with the super. When I first began, site-based management was practiced. We very much went through associates to facilitate everything; rarely would you go to the super. Then the superintendent removed the associates and everyone reported to him. He had conversations with us once or twice a month by telephone, e-mail or personal contact. There was no filtering of information. He went to the source and got the answer, good or bad. Shift is now back to an additional layer. We very much report to a number of different masters. We don't get a consistent message, and our messages don't get passed on to the super in the manner that we deliver it.

An elementary school principal's comment captured the confusion over the role of assistants and the impact of the confusion on the communication structure: "The district portrays these people as supporters, problem solvers, people we can go to for help. People in the field see these people as monitors." A high school principal expressed a view that reflects those of several colleagues: "I feel we do report to the executive director. The issue that I have with that is, I do not view them in a supportive role. I see them as a bearer of messages and making sure we do what we are supposed to do."

The majority of the participants' comments were generally complimentary of the operational role of executive directors, but the data indicate a high level of discomfort with their role in the communication process. A junior high school principal summarized the opinions of many colleagues: "I think the role they play far too often is 'filter.' They filter out feedback that is intended for the superintendent to hear at the decision-making table." A high school principal identified

> a couple of issues when it comes to communication. To be a superintendent or an executive assistant is certainly a very challenging job, and it takes a lot of

> information and a lot of knowledge and expertise and talent and time to build relationships. That is the first thing that we build on, and then we build on expertise and we build on credibility, and we are missing all those links at the moment.

The same principal described the relationship with executive directors: "It is more like a clinical relationship that they have with us, and I don't think that stimulates an environment of inquiry." Other interview participants admitted that they were becoming increasingly guarded in their conversations with district staff, which an elementary principal confirmed: "We never know what they will say. They take from a meeting what they believe are the facts, and we have no idea exactly what they pass on." A high school principal acknowledged, "I don't communicate with the superintendent through the executive director because I am not sure the message is getting through, and if it does get through, it may not be the message I want to send."

Media Effectiveness

The questionnaire results affirmed the value of retaining the current media structures, but the principals generally wanted the processes to be revisited to ensure that they were still effective in terms of meeting the district's communication needs. The questionnaire responses singled out four specific media for discussion: (a) SELT, (b) the Superintendent's Memorandum, (c) the Superintendent's Council, and (d) e-mail. In an attempt to more fully explore the concerns raised in the questionnaire responses, I asked the interview participants for their perceptions of the effectiveness of each medium in terms of meeting the communication needs of district principals.

The Superintendent's Educational Leadership Team (SELT)

The majority of the interview participants were supportive of meeting monthly with the superintendent in a large-group setting. As one elementary school principal

stated, "I think SELT can be the most effective vehicle for the superintendent because at the end of the day I respond better to face-to-face communication." Further affirming SELT, a junior high school principal recommended, "SELT should be a monthly state of the union address, but presented in a manner that allows for involved discussion."

However, several of the interview participants also believed that the success of SELT as a communication medium largely depended on the ability of the superintendent to communicate in that format. According to a junior high school participant, SELT "was built around powerful, charismatic speakers. . . . If you aren't a dynamic speaker, you can't make SELT effective in the current form. SELT wouldn't be a vehicle for me; I would be brutal." A high school principal also acknowledged the challenge of communicating in this large-group format:

> If you are going to be effective, you have to be somewhat charismatic. If you aren't, then this doesn't work. When we put people in front of that podium, it seems to suck the life out of them. . . . SELT is the one opportunity to deliver a message to all principals. If you don't do well there, then you don't appear to be an effective leader.

The majority of the interview participants expressed the concern that the potential of SELT to solicit feedback, gather input, or clarify issues was not being fully tapped. An elementary principal captured the view of the majority of the participants: "At one time, if you can recall, questions would be asked in SELT. Now it never happens. It is almost not encouraged." Another elementary principal commented on his or her perception of the value of SELT as a communication medium: "SELT meetings are such that if I was given a memo, if I was given an executive summary, that would be sufficient."

The Superintendent's Memorandum

The perceived lack of effectiveness of the Superintendent's Memorandum also garnered several comments in the questionnaire. I asked the interview participants to comment on concern about the perceived lack of effectiveness of the Superintendent's Memorandum, and they thought that it had the potential to be effective. However, in its current format it was not meeting its full potential. A junior high school principal whom I interviewed explained:

> The intent of Superintendent's Memo has changed. I believe years ago when it was started, it was intended to be a memo directly from the superintendent to the principals. What it has turned into is a newsletter. . . . It is just a hodgepodge of information, very text heavy, and we are expected to pick up key operational items out of the Superintendent's Memo and follow-up.

Another participant echoed the view of the majority of his colleagues: "The Superintendent's Memo is not effective. I can't figure out the audience, purpose. It is too global."

The Superintendent's Council

Several interview participants also commented on the Superintendent's Council, an advisory body designed to provide principals with an opportunity for direct input into the district's decision-making processes. Reflecting similar comments relating to district communication processes and district media channels, they generally supported the foundational principle of the Superintendent's Council. However, they also contended that the original structure and intent of the advisory body had changed. The majority of the participants wanted to retain the structure while at the same time reaffirming the purpose of the council.

When I asked the interview participants to more specifically comment on the Superintendent's Council as an effective communication medium, they restated many of the views that they reported in the questionnaire. One participant responded, "Superintendent's Council was designed to allow principals to have direct input into the district decision-making process." Probing the issue further, I asked the interview participants to comment on their understanding of the specific purpose of the Superintendent's Council, specifically as it related to their satisfaction with its ability to facilitate an satisfactory level of communication flow to and from the superintendent. They unanimously agreed that the intent of the council was to give principals the opportunity to provide direct input into the district's decision-making process. The principals generally believed that the practices and intent of the council had changed substantially over the past few years. A junior high school principal commented on the original intent of the council: "On two separate occasions I sat on Superintendent's Council. It was the superintendent's desire to heighten the professionalism of principals, to create some separation and treat principals as unique, important people. We have lost some of that." An elementary school principal shared the view of many of the participants that the district had moved away from the original intent of the council:

> It might be an interesting study to look at decisions that have been made in the district over the past few years and see if these decisions were just communicated or if there was actually input sought at the front end. There seems to be a lot more stuff coming out that is for information, from a variety of sources, which means, at the end of the day, why talk about it?

A high school principal expressed the opinion of the majority of the interview participants on the effectiveness of the Superintendent's Council:

> I think it could be a very powerful vehicle if you could have honesty, the clarity, the intent, and the dialogue that is truly two-way. I respect the superintendent has

> to have an agenda and is the driver of the bus, but don't ask for my input if you don't really want it; don't ask for it if you have already made up your mind. Tell me that you have already made up your mind, and help me understand the rationale for the decision so that I can help with the implementation.

Trust

Issues of trust with regard to the communication structure permeated many of the interview participants' answers. An elementary school principal commented on issues of trust in the questionnaire:

> One of the key things for me is trust and I think it is a real challenge for a CEO in any organization. I am not saying that the people haven't been leading with integrity but when I think communication isn't clear and effective, there is a compromise of integrity and people start to create their own little defences.

Another principal asserted, "Important communication coming from a variety of sources creates confusion and distrust."

Governance Structure and Issues of Trust

A senior high school principal's comments were similar to those of his colleagues that issues of trust in the communication structure were unavoidably tied to the flattening of the governance structure. Reflecting on this belief and the current practices of EPSB, the principal noted:

> It strikes me that with respect to the issue of "trust" regarding communication processes, the increase in the lack of trust in the district is likely related to the unintended effects of the flattening of the organization. When we had Associates there was a direct line relationship through the Associate to the Superintendent. The Associate was responsible for about 30 schools, and was able to maintain a fair degree of familiarity with those schools and the staff in them. I felt very comfortable that whether I had a close relationship with this person or not, at least I knew there was someone in a supervisory position who knew me and knew my work, someone who could keep the Superintendent informed if and when necessary. When these positions were eliminated that connection was lost, and I think that connection contributed to a certain degree of trust. The Superintendent, no matter how "super" can not know me or my work in the same manner as the Associate. Therefore the connectedness built through a trusting relationship with

the Associate was gone. In reality the Associates have sort of been replaced by the Directors, except for the line relationship, which is "fuzzy" at best.

E-mail and Issues of Trust

The issue of e-mail and its origination appeared to block effective communication, particularly within a large-scale flattened hierarchy in which the principals believed that they had a direct communication link to the superintendent. One participant echoed the perceptions of many colleagues: "If you get e-mail from the superintendent, one would hope it came from the superintendent. If it didn't, at least let us know where it came from." A junior high school principal stated, "I have received e-mails from the superintendent, but I am not at all confident that they are coming from the superintendent. Someone is reading and sending on his behalf." The same principal acknowledged the structural difficultly of communicating directly with over 200 schools: "I don't know if it is a function of having more than 200 schools reporting to him; very clearly I have a feeling that when I send something to the superintendent, it is not being read by the superintendent."

Informal District Communication Network

The questionnaire respondents also contended that an informal communication network was operating in the district. However, many did not see this as a barrier to the flow of district communication. In fact, several thought that informal networks could improve an organization's effectiveness. I asked the interview participants to identify and comment on the perceived effectiveness of the informal network currently operating in the district under study, but they offered little information on the actual structures or processes. One interview participant summarized the views of many of his colleagues: "I don't believe there is an old boys' network per se in terms of an informal network."

However, acknowledging the generally held belief that the district had an active informal network, the same principal suggested, "I believe there is some positive things that can come from the informal net, especially when experienced, positive individuals put a context around district initiatives; it may add a better understanding."

Although the participants agreed on the positive effect of informal communication structures on organizational effectiveness, they expressed their concern that many principals were choosing not to participate in the informal network. One principal's comment reflected the views of many of the interview participants: "A leader needs an informal network that is open and trusting. I don't believe this is happening in our district. . . . Principals are reluctant to voice an opinion, formally or informally, regardless of how valid their opinion may be." When I asked this participant to comment more specifically on this perception, he stated, "Providing feedback is not risk free." The perception that district communications were being negatively influenced by a lack of trust, particularly with regard to providing feedback in the formal or informal network, was a recurring concern among the principals who participated in both the questionnaire and the interviews.

Principals' Recommendations for Communication

At the end of the formal interview process I gave each of the interview participants an opportunity to offer open-ended recommendations for the district's communication structure. Almost unanimously, they agreed that the structure's current media devices had the potential to be very effective in terms of serving the district's communication needs. However, organizational factors such as structure, lack of clarity, and matters of trust negated the effectiveness of the media. The participants'

recommendations touched on a wide variety of topics, but they can be grouped according to three broad themes: organizational structure, communication media, and trust.

Organizational Structure

One interview participant prefaced a recommendation for the communication structure with the following comment:

> I think the way the current structure is being used not only damages communication and creates confusion around the communication channels, I also think it has a negative impact on morale among principals in the district. . . . I don't think that is the intended result. I believe, rather, that it is an undesirable outcome that is happening as a result of the dysfunction we have in our organizational structure.

Another interview participant's recommendation reaffirmed the views of many colleagues on the role of executive directors in the communication process: "We should rejig the organizational chart and talk about what we truly have. Let's create the true lines of communication and make them known, and let's talk about what we really have."

A third interview participant commented on the perceived lack of opportunities for principals to provide direct input into the district decision-making processes: "I believe the decision-making table is too small. Half a dozen people sitting down with limited information making decisions is problematic. There needs to be more opportunities for principals to influence the decision-making process."

The interview participants acknowledged the complexities associated with communicating within a large-scale organization. However, many recommended that the superintendent implement a communication structure that would give principals more opportunities to participate directly in the district decision-making processes. A junior high school principal summarized the recommendations of several of his colleagues: that

the superintendent "go to grassroots kinds of meetings where stakeholders are invited to meet with the superintendent in small groups, and then listen to them."

Only a few principals specifically recommended that the district return to a more hierarchical organizational structure; the majority concluded that the current structure did not support a sufficient communication flow between the superintendent and principals and vice versa. One elementary principal suggested that the span of control was too large to facilitate effective communication flow: "The flat idea works well in theory; however, how many people can you really supervise appropriately?" Another elementary principal advised that

> there are some more critical organizational pieces to be worked out, and then communication issues can be addressed. . . . We first need to know how the organization is going to be structured in terms of roles and responsibilities; once that happens, we can figure out the implications.

Communication Media

The findings from the questionnaires and the interviews revealed the principals' belief that the media devices that the superintendent was currently using to communicate with them had the potential to effectively meet the district's communication needs. However, they also contended that they were not being fully utilized in a manner that was facilitating an appropriate flow of critical information at all levels of the district. One interview participant reiterated the views of several participants on the current use of media in the district:

> The district should conduct a communication audit—critically examine the functionality and purpose of each piece of the communication structure. The purpose of things like SELT and Sup's Memo has been lost. No one can truly articulate what the purpose is, so if we don't know what the purpose is, how do we know how successful we are doing in this area?

The interview participants offered more specific recommendations on the four primary devices that the superintendent used to communicate directly with the principals: the Superintendent's Memorandum, SELT, the Superintendent's Council, and e-mail.

The recommendations on the weekly Superintendent's Memorandum revealed the principals' general belief that this medium had moved away from it original intent as a device designed to provide a direct communication link from the superintendent to the principals in matters related to district operations. With regard to the perceived value of the Superintendent's Memorandum as a communication device, one junior high school principal recommended:

> The Superintendent's Memorandum needs to be redefined. At one time if you were a principal and you read the Superintendent's Memorandum you knew only crucial information was included and you didn't miss reading it on a Friday. You didn't want to miss any important information. Now, I read it when I get time, maybe Monday or maybe later.

An elementary school principal commented on the perceived effectiveness of the Superintendent's Memorandum: "The purpose of Superintendent's Memorandum needs to be examined. . . . It is such a hodgepodge of information. Is it a district memo or direct information from the super, information that we need to pay attention to?"

SELT. The format of the monthly SELT meetings drew recommendations from many of the interview participants. Generally, they believed in the value of having the superintendent host all principals in a monthly format. However, the majority of the principals recommended that the purpose and structure be examined to ensure that they use the time away from school administration in the most productive manner possible.

More specific recommendations on SELT ranged from abolishing the monthly meeting to restructuring to allow greater participation of principals in the sessions. The

majority of the interview participants also recommended that SELT be restructured to give principals more opportunities to engage in direct dialogue with the superintendent.

The Superintendent's Council. The interview participants affirmed the value of the Superintendent's Council in terms of its format, which allowed principals direct input into district decision making, but they felt that this particular aspect of organizational structure also needed to be reexamined in light of its original intent. They believed that the original intent of the council was as a vehicle through which the principals could directly offer the superintendent unfiltered decision-making input. Many principals suggested that the focus of Superintendent's Council had shifted from input gathering to information dissemination. A high school principal summarized the recommendations of the interview participants: "Superintendent's Council needs to be totally restructured. Either restructure it, making it a risk-free process for providing feedback from schools, or get rid of it."

Issues of Trust

Trust as related to confidence in the district communication structure permeated many of the comments of the interview participants during both the formal questioning segment and the open-ended portion of the interviews. The majority of the principals reported that their issues of distrust were not reflective of the relationships they had with senior district officials. At the same time, they maintained that the current communication structure did not give the superintendent enough opportunities to hear directly from principals on matters of importance.

With regard to the perception that the current structure did not give the superintendent enough unfiltered information from principals, one elementary principal recommended that the superintendent "continue with current processes such as

Superintendent's Council, but go out and set up a structure where he can talk to grassroots people. He needs the information from the executive directors, but he needs to hear more unfiltered information." Another elementary principal asserted, "I need to know that the superintendent is aware of what is happening in my school. I don't believe that is happening in the district at this point."

Interview Summary

The study participants generally indicated a high degree of satisfaction with the district as a whole. However, their comments on the current communication structure highlighted the complexities associated with developing and sustaining effective communication processes within a large-scale flattened organizational structure. The participants in both the questionnaire and the interview portions of the study agreed that the effectiveness of the current communication structure was compromised by issues of organizational structure and process utilization.

The interviewees offered detailed insights into the themes that the questionnaire responses raised. Although I gave the interviewees the semi-structured interview format, the majority of the questions centered on their perceptions of the four broad themes that emerged from the questionnaire responses: organizational structure, role ambiguity, issues of trust, and richness of district media (Table 2).

Concerns raised regarding the perceived lack of clarity surrounding the role of executive directors (assistants to the superintendent), in terms of their position in the district's organizational structure, had created high levels of dissatisfaction with the communication structure generally. More specifically, principals expressed a high degree of uncertainty whether or not communication, emanating at the executive director level, was directive or, as publicly described, supportive.

Table 2

Summary of Interview Data

Themes	Interview data
Organizational structure and communications	• Expectations for direct involvement in district decision-making within a flattened organizational structure were not being met • Perception that the actual governance structure was different from the stated structure • Belief that changes in structure have occurred without formal discussion or acknowledgement • The district's large span of control may not allow for a sufficient flow of critical information to and from the superintendent
Role ambiguity	• Perceived changes to district governance structure without formal discussion have created issues of trust • The role of assistants to the superintendent was unclear; on an operational level it was identified as a supporting role; however, increasingly principals saw the role as more directive in nature • Principals' believed their status as a direct report to the superintendent on an operational level has diminished • Issues of role ambiguity have created perceptions of a blockage in the flow of critical information to and from the superintendent
Trust	• Perceptions of diminished opportunities to directly participate in district decision-making have created a belief that input may not be desired • Perceptions of role ambiguity have created issues of trust • Principals indicated types of information they are willing to share with someone acting in a supporting role was different than the types of information they are willing to share with someone acting in a directing role
Communication media	• Expectations for communication media, designed specifically for a flattened governance structure, were not being met • Principals believed the media had the potential to be effective if utilized in the manner under which it was originally designed

Regarding issues of trust, the participants were concerned that the perceived change in their status as senior leaders and the changing role of executive directors from one of support to one that is more directive in nature had further diminished their opportunity to effectively participate in district decision-making processes. This perception left the participants feeling that they could no longer influence district decision making in any significant manner.

With respect to media effectiveness, when it moved to a flattened hierarchical structure, the district implemented three strategically designed media devices that were composed of the weekly Superintendent's Memorandum, monthly SELT meetings, and the Superintendent's Council. Each of these devices was specifically designed to allow for a more direct flow of operational communication between the superintendent and principals and vice versa.

According to the participants, the media devices played a particularly critical role during the period when the associate superintendent level was eliminated and principals were identified as senior management, with a direct reporting link to the superintendent. The current perception of principals was that these devices, although they still had the potential to play a very effective role in the district communication process, were not meeting the intent with which they were created.

Finally, issues related to the district's size and its perceived influence on communications garnered several comments. The participants questioned whether or not with the current structure, with 200+ principals who reported directly to the superintendent, the superintendent had a comprehensive understanding of what was happening in each of the district schools.

These issues, and the issues raised in the two foregoing chapters, are more fully discussed within the context of a discussion of the findings in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This chapter begins with an overview of the study and addresses the first research question: How satisfied are principals with the communication structure between them and the superintendent? Although the study focused on the principals' satisfaction with the district's communication structure, a number of related findings, each of which influenced their perceptions, emerged from the data. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to an analysis and discussion of those findings. Recommendations and implications for the district under study (research question 2) and for future research are included in Chapter 7. The study concludes with my personal reflections on my perceptions during and after the research process.

Overview of the Study

I derived the information that I collected for the study from four major sources: (a) a literature review, (b) an examination of relevant district documents, (c) questionnaires that I distributed to a population of 202 district principals, and (d) interviews that I conducted with 12 principals who had completed the questionnaire. Prior to the commencement of the data collection, I pilot-tested the questions and amended them in response to feedback on them.

In May 2005 I distributed the questionnaires by mail to all district principals (n = 202); 104 completed and returned it, which is a return rate of 51.4%. The questionnaire consisted of three sections: Section 1 captured the demographic data of the principals in 6 subcategories; Section 2, which consisted of 15 subcategories, addressed issues related to the two research questions; and Section 3, which consisting of 3

subcategories, gave the participants an opportunity to offer more detailed and specific responses on the communication structure.

Findings

As the data show, the principals' overall level of satisfaction with the communication link between them and the superintendent can be summed up as moderate. This rating reflects their perception that the communication structure had the potential to be effective, yet they saw a number of interrelated factors that were creating increased levels of dissatisfaction. For example, the principals expressed high levels of satisfaction with their ability to directly access the superintendent when the need to do so arose and were generally pleased with the timeliness of his responses to their queries. At the same time, they also identified a number of internal practices and processes that were inhibiting the flow of critical information to and from the superintendent.

Four recurrent themes that the participants perceived to be negative influences on district communications clearly emerged from both the questionnaire and the interview responses. They often discussed these themes in an interrelated manner, which resulted in difficulty at times in singling each one out for more in-depth probing. The four emergent themes were role ambiguity, organizational structure, media effectiveness, and trust. The following discussion of the themes acknowledges their interconnectedness, and, in the process, I comment on the perceived linkages. Inherent in the findings are a number of learning's that offer insights into school-district communications, particularly within a purportedly flattened organizational structure. Where appropriate, I include references to relevant research on the topics discussed.

Role Ambiguity

In this study I found that a lack of clear organizational role definition at both the central and the school level has created perceptions of role ambiguity. The lack of a clear role definition—specifically, the roles of principals and executive directors—has created the perception that there has been a misalignment in the governance structure that has created not only issues with role clarity, but also perceptions of the blockage of information to and from the superintendent. In the process, the participants reported high levels of dissatisfaction with district communication processes specifically and the district governance structure more generally.

High expectations for direct, unfiltered communication with the superintendent resulted from the flattening of the district organizational structure, which included the elimination of associate superintendents and the subsequent referral to principals as senior members of district administration. The shift in organizational structure, according to the principals, clearly gave them a direct supervisory and communication link to the Superintendent. District language and practice clearly established that relationship. Initially, practice reflected that relationship. However, the relationship became cloudier with the shift in role from assistants to the superintendent to executive directors. District language at the time of the appointments clearly defined the role of executive directors as supportive and at the same level as principals in the governance structure. In spite of public statements that suggested that the executive directors were continuing to play a supporting role, the principals suggested that the executive directors gradually assumed a more direct supervisory role. This change was particularly more noticeable in the two years before I began the data collection for this study. Terminology referring to executive

directors as *senior administration* became more frequently used, along with references to executive directors as playing a direct supervisory role on some level.

As Figure 6 illustrates, the principals came to believe that the executive directors were now assuming a position somewhere between them and the superintendent. Although the exact nature of that relationship was unclear, the principals began to believe that they now reported directly to an executive director on some level. According to the study participants, the perceived misalignment between the actual and the publicly stated structure was problematic. The shift took place when elements of the structure that were set up to serve a specific purpose appeared to be hijacked to serve a different purpose, intentional or unintentional.

The negative consequence of the role ambiguity with regard to the district's communication processes specifically was the fact that principals believed that the kinds of information that they were comfortable in providing to someone in a supporting role was different from the type of information that they were comfortable in providing to someone in a supervisory role. The issue of trust continually emerged when the principals discussed their concerns. More specifically, they referred to this issue within the context of past practice—that their past role included direct, unfiltered communication with the superintendent. The change in practice left them concerned that messages passed to the superintendent through the executive director now had the potential to be filtered.

The perceptions of the participants in this study align with those in the research that suggest that the lack of clearly communicated governance information generally can create issues of role ambiguity (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964;

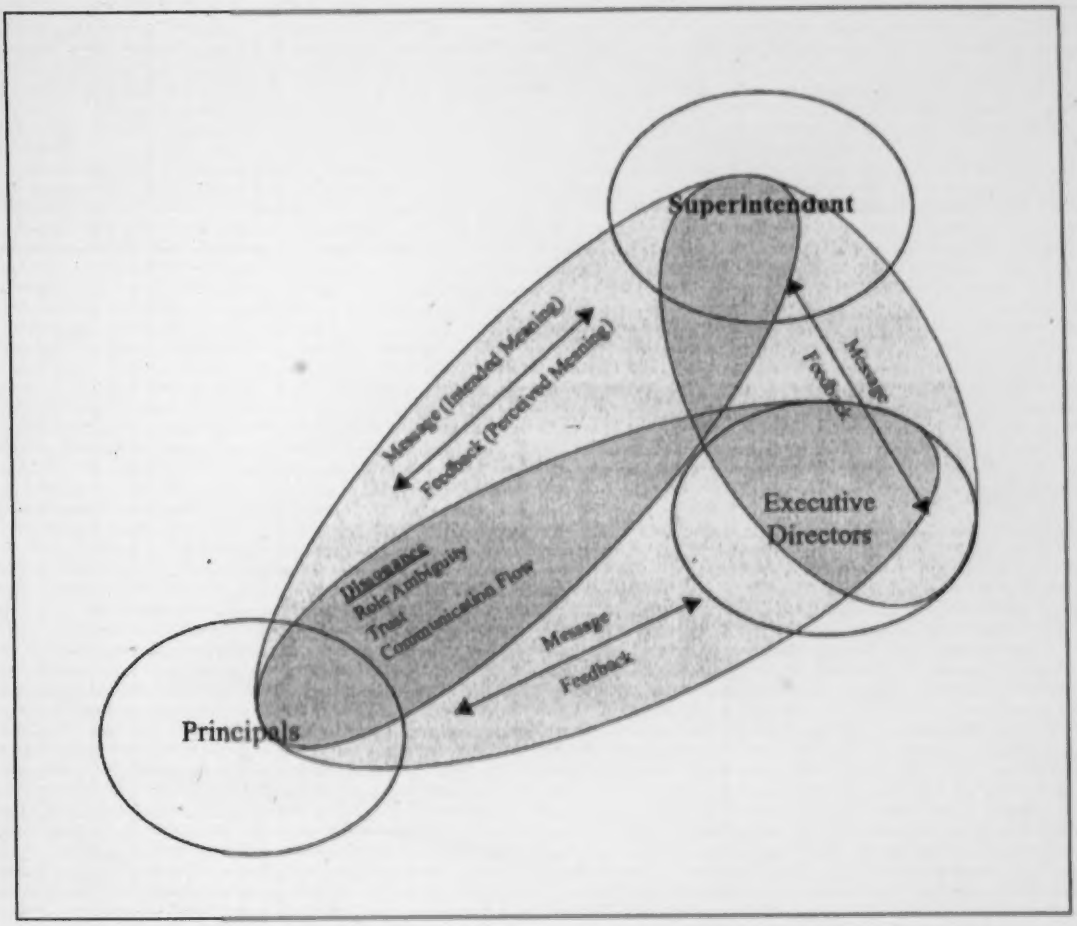

Figure 6. Principals' perceptions of the district's communication structure.

Van Sell, Brief & Schuler, 1981). More specifically, as also affirmed in the research, the lack of clarity in messages pertaining to the roles and associated responsibilities of principals and the executive directors, served to increase levels of personal uncertainty and, in the process, reinforced perceptions of dissatisfaction and role ambiguity (Kahn et al., 1964; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970).

The findings of this study, which the research has validated, suggest that personal role ambiguity increases when employees perceive a great deal of organizational

uncertainty about their role (Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Van Sell et al., 1981; Rizzo et al., 1970). The research also affirmed the findings of this study with regard to feelings of dissatisfaction with communication processes caused by perceptions of role ambiguity, which suggests that role ambiguity is linked to negative outcomes such as lower levels of satisfaction and higher levels of frustration and anxiety (Bedian & Armenakis, 1981; Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Lopopolo, 2002; Rizzo et al., 1970; Van Sell et al., 1981).

The effects of role ambiguity can be mitigated if an organization is willing to clearly identify and communicate three specific principles on key organizational roles: authority boundaries, task boundaries, and political boundaries (Hirschhorn & Gilmore, 1992; Marginson, 2006; Rizzo et al., 1970). Given the principals' belief that they are still in a direct reporting and communicating line to the superintendent, simply imposing new boundaries without extensive dialogue will not provide relief from their perceptions of ambiguity. Smith and Brannick (1990) conducted a study of job satisfaction with 345 social service caseworkers and clerical workers in southwestern United States and found that leaders can ensure role clarity, a significant factor in job satisfaction, when they are willing to openly discuss and negotiate specific expectations of organizational roles.

The research of Pearson (1991) supported the participants' dissatisfaction that resulted from their perception of decreased opportunities to engage in meaningful feedback. In a longitudinal study of railroad workers in Australia, Pearson found that lower levels of satisfaction are inextricably linked to role ambiguity. His research suggests that the effects of role ambiguity are perpetuated in situations with an absence of meaningful feedback specifically designed to facilitate mutual understanding of organizational roles and expectations. Conversely, according to Pearson, offering

frequent opportunities to engage in meaningful feedback activities reduces the level of role ambiguity.

Not affirmed in this study are findings from research that suggest that role ambiguity is directly linked to an employee's propensity to seek other employment opportunities during periods of uncertainty (Bedian & Armenakis, 1981; Rizzo et al., 1970). Other researchers have suggested that role ambiguity results in lower levels of organizational commitment (Kahn et al., 1964; Lopopolo, 2002). Although the principals who participated in this study reported high levels of role ambiguity, they frequently prefaced their critical comments with affirmations of personal commitment to the organization. I made no attempt to focus on the antecedents or moderators of role ambiguity that might have influenced the principals' stated commitment to the organization under study.

There is no current additional research specifically on issues of role ambiguity that result from unfulfilled expectations for a flattened educational structure, but the findings of this study indicate that unfilled expectations for direct involvement in district decision making reduces personal satisfaction and in the process negatively affects the flow of information throughout the organization.

Organizational Structure

The principals believed that they were still operating as senior district leaders within a flattened governance structure and expressed high expectations for the direct communication link between them and the superintendent that they saw as at a direct working level. One participant observed, "It is positive for me to only have one person to report to"; and another suggested, "I can pick up the phone and talk to the superintendent. This cuts down on the bureaucracy." Although they were adamant that they were still in a

direct communication link to the superintendent, they also acknowledged the complexity of direct line communicating, particularly when it was occurring within a large, flattened organizational structure: "Reporting directly to the superintendent is good in theory but less good in practice."

However, that acknowledgement did not ease their concern about the limited number of opportunities available to engage in meaningful two-way communication with the superintendent. In the interviews the majority of the principals expressed great dissatisfaction with the district communication processes because they contended that the district's large span of control was not facilitating an appropriate level of critical information flow to and from the superintendent.

More specifically, the principals identified several common expectations for the district's communication processes that believed were not being met. First, they expected to have continuous and direct access to critical district operational information. Second, they expected to have frequent opportunities to participate directly in district decision making, directly or indirectly, with the superintendent himself. Third, they expected that the district's communication processes would facilitate an appropriate level of information flow throughout the district to allow them to make decisions within a district context and yet, at the same time, protect the autonomy of site-based decision making. Finally, they expected the superintendent as their direct line supervisor to have a good operational understanding of their respective sites.

The degree to which the principals believed that these expectations were not being met in the current structure negatively affected their satisfaction with the district generally and with district communication processes specifically. In spite of the fact that the majority of the interview participants criticized the lack of frequency with which they

were able to engage in direct communication with the superintendent, they also indicated that the current communication structure allowed them to contact the superintendent directly when they needed to do so. The lack of regular direct, individualized contact with the superintendent, particularly with respect to direct communication that the principals themselves initiated, caused the principals to guard the somewhat autonomous relationship that they believed currently existed under the purportedly flattened governance structure.

When I asked the principals whether their beliefs about site-based decision making also influenced their perceptions of satisfaction with the district's communication processes, a number suggested that site-based decision making gave them the autonomy that they required to meet the specific needs of their individual schools while at the same time allowing them direct participation in district decision-making processes whenever the need to offer input arose. However, their perceptions of autonomy within the current structure were tempered by the fact that the district's beliefs and practices with regard to the role of site-based management had changed over the past few years.

Changes in their status, according to the principals, related more specifically to their perception that opportunities to directly participate in district decision-making processes as senior district leaders had diminished significantly over recent years. Within this context they were dissatisfied with the district's communication processes. At the same time they were clearly interested in situating their perceptions of decreased opportunities to engage in two-way communication with the superintendent within the belief that the large district span of control did not permit frequent communication with the superintendent. This was perceived as problematic because the principals thought that if they were in a direct supervisory link to the superintendent, that relationship also

presupposed that they would have the opportunity to engage in regular direct communication.

However, correlating their expressed levels of dissatisfaction with district communication processes directly with the issue of span of control could lead to inappropriate conclusions. Research on the effectiveness of communication structures within a broad span of control has not examined the collective impact of all structural influences on organizational processes generally (Theobald & Nicholson-Crotty, 2005). The issue of the effectiveness of ideal manager-subordinate ratios, specifically as they influence the interrelatedness of structural functions, require more focused research, particularly within the realm of school governance (Meir & Bohte, 2000).

Few studies have definitively identified the ideal supervisor-subordinate ratio; however, research has validated the perception that a large span of control has certain characteristics that impede communication processes (Brewer, 1971; Delbecq, 1968). While not a focused examination of communication structures specifically, Meir and Bohte's (2000) study of 678 Texas school districts examined how the relationship between central office administrators and school-based administrators affects the organization's effectiveness. The findings of their study suggest that larger spans of control at the first-line supervision (central administration) and middle-management (principals) levels are positively associated with improved organizational performance (effectiveness). However, they also suggest that there is a point at which large manager-employee ratios can negatively influence a manager's ability to communicate, coordinate, and supervise. Because they focused solely on a single outcome—achievement levels—they did not attempt to draw conclusions about what the ideal ratio for a school district should be. Theobald and Nicholson-Crotty (2005) replicated and extended Meir and

Bohte's work and concluded that the latter's findings are problematic because public organizations and public managers pursue multiple goals. Theobald and Nicholson-Crotty posted that "there are numerous optimal manager-subordinate ratios, perhaps one for every goal" (p. 658). Furthermore "The findings from these studies suggest that manager-subordinate ratios, along with other structural influences on production, deserve considerably more attention than they have received in modern research on administration" (p. 648).

This study presents some narrow insights into span-of-control issues within an educational context generally, but it does not consider the impact of span of control on all aspects of the district, nor does it consider the influence of other structural influences such as site-based management and the utilization of specific types of communication media. Clearly, this is an area that requires more in-depth research.

Media Effectiveness

With respect to district media, as I alluded to earlier, the principals maintained that media designed to facilitate the flow of critical communication between the superintendent and principals were not operating to their full potential. More specifically, they believed that the processes had stepped away from the intent under which they were originally developed and implemented: to satisfy the unique communication needs of a flattened governance structure. That original intent was to develop and implement a system that would allow the superintendent to easily engage in open, unfiltered, two-way communication with all principals. In that regard, four very specific and distinct media links were implemented during the flattening process: the Superintendent's Memorandum, the Superintendent's Council, SELT, and e-mail.

The dissatisfaction specifically with the effectiveness of the weekly Superintendent's Memorandum was affirmed in research that suggested that memorandum communication is the least effective medium in terms of ensuring that an appropriate flow of information is maintained throughout an organization (Daft, 1999; Mintzberg, 1980). Dissatisfaction with the memorandum arose out of the principals' belief that it had changed from a direct operational communication link between the superintendent and principals that contained only information on district operations to a broad district newsletter. Although the principals saw the value of a district newsletter, they viewed this change in focus as the removal of a direct communication link between them and the superintendent. By extension, they viewed the removal of this direct communication link as further erosion of their influence as senior leaders in the district.

With respect to the Superintendent's Council, the principals agreed that the council in its original form had the potential to be an effective communication link between them and the superintendent. The most important factor was that they were able to offer regular input into district decision making through their representative on the council. They believed that their views were not only well represented, but also supported if there was a need. Over time the principals felt that the Superintendent's Council was being used more frequently to direct one-way district information from the superintendent to the school environment. Consequently, the principals reported low to moderate levels of satisfaction with the current utilization of this particular medium.

Their perceptions of the potential effectiveness of a medium that incorporates face-to-face communication were affirmed in research that suggested that face-to-face communications are highest in channel richness and facilitate meaningful dialogue and

that discussion and feedback will, in turn, reduce ambiguity (Daft, 2003; Mintzberg, 1980).

With regard to SELT, the principals saw the value of meeting as a group on a monthly basis because they believed that this medium could play an important role in providing direction to the district and a context, clarifying district initiatives, and facilitating district cohesiveness. At the same time, they were highly uncertain about the overall purpose of SELT, specifically in facilitating an effective and direct flow of communication to and from the superintendent. This lack of clarity about the structure and purpose resulted in the principals' dissatisfaction with this medium. The perception that SELT had devolved into a very general information dissemination forum negated the value of direct, face-to-face communication. One participant summarized the perceptions of his colleague: "Much of the information currently being provided in SELT can be delivered by e-mail." Whereas the participants expressed general dissatisfaction with the large-group setting of SELT, they were more receptive to the smaller post-SELT groupings. Delbecq (1968) supported this view of smaller discussion groups in a study of communication within a large span of control and found that group cohesion and improved communication flow is better achieved through participation in multiple and overlapping groups of smaller size.

The study participants also claimed that e-mail was being overused at all levels of the organization, which created information overload for the principals. They were concerned that they were missing important information that was mixed with a host of other e-mails because they did not have time to sort though the e-mail traffic in a controlled and deliberate manner. Their perceptions have been validated in research that has suggested that the impersonal nature of e-mail, uncertainty about how quickly the

information will be delivered, and its frequent overuse have the potential to negatively influence its overall effectiveness (Daft, 2003; Mintzberg, 1980).

The participants' dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of district media was heightened by their belief that the superintendent was not fully accessing information that could positively influence district decision making. Their frequent references to the past, when they seemed to have a greater level of direct input and influence, suggested that the principals now believed that that level of input was no longer desired. Madlock (2008) affirmed the correlation between leaders' strategic use of media structures and employees' satisfaction in a study of 220 individuals employed in a variety of Midwest companies. He found a strong positive relationship between strategic media selection and use, leadership, and employee satisfaction. More specifically, Madlock found that employees are more satisfied when supervisors strategically use media to engage in meaningful dialogue with subordinates and, in the process, use appropriate direct relational and task-oriented behaviors (Goldhaber et. al., 1978; Madlock, 2008). The influence of leadership behaviors cannot be understated, but neither can the influence of appropriate media selection.

In their study of 598 full-time employees, Byrne and LeMay (2006) also validated the participants' contention that satisfaction levels would improve if the district engaged in more direct, face-to-face dialogue:

> Employees derived most of their satisfaction with the information they received about their job from rich communication channels such as face-to-face meetings with their bosses, phone conversations and departmental meetings. Lean communication mechanisms such as quarterly meetings, the employee newsletter, or written memos and notices contributed a small addition to their satisfaction level in information about their jobs. Email and intranet (moderate communication mechanism) contributed nothing in addition to the rich and lean media. (p. 168)

The data that I collected in this study indicate that principals, who see themselves as senior leaders in a flattened governance structure, have very specific expectations for internal communication media: that district media will (a) facilitate an appropriate level of direct involvement in district decision making; (b) provide a direct, unfiltered communication link to and from the superintendent; and (c) allow an appropriate flow of critical operational information throughout the district. As the data also indicate, higher levels of dissatisfaction occur when principals believe that those needs are not being met.

Trust

The principals believed that the lack of clarity of key roles—more specifically, concern about their own and executive directors' place—in the district governance structure has created increased levels of personal dissatisfaction. As a consequence, they not only expressed higher levels of dissatisfaction not only with their own situation, but also with the flow of critical communication throughout the district. They contended that additional layers that are being inserted into the district governance structure without discussion or consultation are being used more frequently to pass critical operational information between them and the superintendent. The uncertainty of their relationship with the executive directors from a publicly stated supporting role to an undefined supervisory role has caused them to become more guarded about the types of information that they are willing to share.

Although it is seemingly small on the surface, several principals raised a concern that responses to direct communications to the superintendent are more frequently being composed by someone other than the superintendent. The issue is that they are in a direct reporting line to the superintendent and, in this capacity, expect that practice will accurately reflect the district structure. They claimed that the practice has not only

violated their understanding of the direct reporting relationship that they thought existed between them and the superintendent, but also removed them from that relationship in an unstated manner. The fact that the shift has appeared to occur in the absence of open dialogue has heightened the perceptions of distrust that other events have already created. Although the principals did not appear to be willing to acknowledge that a shift in governance structure was occurring, they suggested that the district was slowly morphing into a more traditional structure, without the clarity of open discussion on the perceived change: Two principals lamented, "There seems to be a growing bureaucracy in the district that is creating layers between the superintendent and principals," and "I do not feel that principals are treated as senior staff. There are far too many administrators being placed downtown who serve as senior staff."

The majority of the principals expressed concern about the apparent shift in governance structure, but a small number of their colleagues not only acknowledged the shift, but also went as far as to recommend that the district continue to move to a more traditional structure. However, even those who endorsed the traditional structure raised the concern that the lack of transparency of the changes had created a level of distrust for district practices generally.

Byrne and LeMay (2006) affirmed the findings of this study as they relate specifically to issues of trust that arise from the perception that fundamental organizational issues are being implemented in a less than transparent manner. They concluded that "trust in top management is important in communication" (p. 167). More specifically, "Trust in top management was related to the quality of information received from top management and the supervisor, and this related to overall satisfaction in information about the company, business unit and job" (p, 167). D'Aprix (1996)

discussed the belief that decisions are being made in a less than open and trustworthy manner and suggested that these kinds of perceptions can create situations in which "in the mind of the recipient(s) there is a full-blown conspiracy underway, with management knowing all the details but unwilling to reveal any of them. The assumed motivation is simple: they (management) doesn't care about us" (p. 41). Although none of the participants suggested full-blown conspiracy to make decisions in isolation, they commonly believed that a very select group at the senior level was tightly controlling information about the decision-making processes. Neher (1997) validated the participants' perceptions and responses and concluded that the "absence of supportiveness, trust, credibility, openness, and candor presumably leads to a defensive climate" (p. 95).

The communication processes utilized during periods of organizational change, although not the primary focus of this study, cannot be ignored, because changes to structure influence the perceptions of those affected (Fullan, 2001; Jones et al., 2005; Neher, 1997; Overstreet-Miller & Gorman, 1995). Not unlike any other school district, the participants in this study were engaged in a process of continual change, not only at the pedagogical level, but also at the managerial level. These principals supported the changes generally; however, they expressed concern about the communication processes that were being used to engage them in the change activities. As the literature suggested, organizations deemed to be the most successful in dealing with constant change are those that are mindful of the need to engage all staff members through by continuously communicating the shared goals and objectives of the organization (Hanson, 1985; Lewis, 1975; Ramsay, 2002).

I did not examine the effects of district changes processes in this study, but the study participants frequently discussed changes to district practice in the interviews and suggested that the intent and purposes of change in the district were not always clearly communicated to the people charged with implementing the change at the school level—the principals. More specifically, the lack of opportunities to engage in open, two-way dialogue on the implementation of new initiatives created an impression that feedback, unless it mirrored district direction, was not desired. In that regard, a number of principals reported that they remained silent even when they believed that they had something positive to offer.

Peter Lilienthal (as cited in Ho, 2001), President of *InTouch* Management Communication Systems Inc., affirmed this reaction:

> Surveys done by his company show that 90 percent of employees believe they have good ideas for improving the effectiveness of their companies, but only about 50 percent ever share those ideas. The most common reasons given by the employees for not sharing this information are that they don't see a good way to communicate their ideas or that they don't believe management cares. (p. 4)

Synthesis of the Findings

As the data indicate, the lack of clarity with regard to the role of executive director created a situation in which the principals were reluctant to provide information to the superintendent, especially through a third party. Although they clearly trusted the executive directors as individuals, they also believed that the information would be, intentionally or unintentionally, filtered before it reached its intended recipient. As a result, the principals passed on information that they thought the superintendent would receive in a positive light. D'Aprix (1996) concurred with this practice: "The ultimate purpose of organizational communication is to communicate openly and without the

selective filtering that people often engage in at work but that requires high trust and an environment in which there is little or no fear factor" (p. 148).

The findings of this study suggest that subordinates who communicate within a low-trust environment have a tendency to emphasize positive information, withhold negative information, and pass on the kinds of information that they think 'the boss' wants to hear. Tourish and Robson (2006) affirmed this belief in a review of the research on upward communication. They found that most employees choose not to provide feedback even if they believe that they have something important to say. Their reluctance to offer feedback is based on the actions of managers who verbally or nonverbally send a message that employees should not only share a common set of values, but also unquestioningly accept that the managers are in the best position to understand the organization's internal and external environments.

Although the principals in this study did not want to leave the impression that they were completely without voice, they suggested that they had fewer opportunities to provide direct feedback, and particularly direct input into district decision making. Kowalski (2005) validated the perception that satisfaction levels increase if district communications processes are utilized in the manner in which they are intended: "When communication, within a large organization, produces mutual understandings, mutual influence, negotiation, openness, credibility, and trust, positive organizational development becomes more probable" (p. 108).

The dissatisfaction that results from perceptions of role ambiguity was repeatedly stated in both the questionnaire and interview responses. However, this study did not affirm employees' propensity to leave during periods of role ambiguity, as the literature on this topic reported. I did not explore this aspect of role ambiguity in any detail, but the

culture of public-education institutions generally, and the principals' self-professed loyalty to the district specifically, may serve to mitigate any desire to leave.

Finally, the data clearly show that principals who work within a flattened organizational structure have very specific expectations for direct participation in district decision-making processes and for the communication processes needed to encourage the requisite amount of involvement.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter I present my conclusions from the data that I collected and the related literature and make recommendations and discuss the implications for both the district and future research. The study concludes with a personal reflection of my perceptions during the research process.

The focus of this study was principal satisfaction with the reporting and communication structure between individual principals and the superintendent. More specifically, the overall purpose of the study was to determine (a) how satisfied EPSB principals are with the structure of the communication between schools and the superintendent, and (b) determine whether modifications might be incorporated to make the system more effective.

Conclusions

I designed the study to be focused and direct, restricted solely to an examination of the satisfaction levels of principals who work within a purportedly flattened school district governance structure with the communication link between them and the superintendent. Although the study remained true to its original intent in that I believe that I accurately captured the perceptions of principals' satisfaction, other aspects of organizational life that are clearly linked to communication processes emerged as the study progressed. I believe that the additional related findings will enhance our understanding of not only the role of organizational communications within an educational context, but also of organizational communications regardless of the setting.

I made no attempt to capture the perceptions of other district constituencies in this study, but I recognize that their perceptions and understandings could further increase our understanding of the findings. More specifically, I believe that learning the superintendent's perceptions of the district communication processes would yield a more complete understanding of the purpose and perceived effectiveness of EPSB's communication processes. However, I premised this study on my belief that the constituents whom I studied play a major role in achieving the district's overall mandate, and I present the major findings within this context.

The major contributions of this study to the literature on organizational communications within a flattened governance structure are as follows:

1. Principals who operate within a flattened governance structure have specific expectations for imposed communication processes. Specifically, (a) they expect to have a direct and unfiltered communication link to the superintendent, (b) they have high expectations for direct involvement in district decision-making processes, (c) they expect district communication media to facilitate a direct link to the superintendent and their direct involvement in district decision making, (d) they expect the organizational structure to reflect and respect the principles of a flattened organizational structure, and (e) they expect the structure to facilitate an appropriate level of decision-making autonomy at the school level.
2. High levels of dissatisfaction, which can decrease the commitment to the organization's goals, occur when principals perceive that their expectation of direct communication within a flattened hierarchy is not being met.

3. The flow of critical organizational information is negatively impacted when principals perceive role ambiguity. In this study the principals reported that they consciously engaged in self-filtering of information when they were unsure whether they were communicating with someone who was acting in a directing versus a supporting role. These findings support prior research that reported that the lack of clear communication of organizational roles and responsibilities can create issues of role ambiguity and, in the process, heighten levels of dissatisfaction.
4. The study has specific implications for school districts that are considering a move to a flattened governance structure. Specifically, the findings reveal that traditional approaches to district communications may not operate effectively in a flattened environment. Flattened school district hierarchies, by definition, presuppose a desire to place principals in a more direct operational line to the superintendent. In that regard, districts that are contemplating a move to a flattened organizational structure with a larger span of control must clearly and strategically define the reporting relationships and their expectations for both principals and the superintendent. They must implement communication processes that will facilitate that relationship by offering the parties frequent opportunities to engage in direct two-way communication. In addition, they must strategically design other district communication processes to complement that relationship.

Recommendations for Practice

The second purpose of this study was to determine whether modifications might be incorporated to make the district communication structure more effective. Following

an analysis of the data, considerable reflection on the principals' recommendations, and key findings, I make a number of specific recommendations:

1. As the data show, issues of role ambiguity have created high levels of dissatisfaction among principals. During extensive discussions on this topic, the principals continually suggested that ambiguity was negatively impacting the flow of critical information throughout the district. More specifically, they reported a high degree of uncertainty about their role and the role of the executive directors in the overall governance structure. In that regard, I recommend that the roles, expectations, level of accountability, and authority at all levels of the organization be examined, affirmed, and revised as required. Upon completion of the review, I recommend that the terms of responsibility be affirmed at the senior level and clearly communicated to all levels of the organization.
2. The data reveal the principals' belief that the district communication media are not fully meeting the expectations for communication within a flattened hierarchy. More specifically, the principals expect to (a) be presented with opportunities as senior leaders to engage in more frequent two-way dialogue with the superintendent, (b) have more opportunities to offer direct input into the district's decision-making processes, and (c) receive clearly articulated operational information on a more regular basis. In that regard, I recommend that the district consider conducting a comprehensive audit of district communication processes and purposes to ensure that the media that are currently being utilized are efficiently and effectively meeting the needs and expectations of a flattened governance hierarchy.

3. The data show that the principals believe that both SELT and the Superintendent's Council were originally designed as direct, unfiltered links between principals and the superintendent and that the current use of the two communication vehicles is different from the original intent. In that regard, I recommend that the district consider revisiting the purposes of both SELT and Superintendent's Council to ensure that they are still providing the superintendent with a direct, unfiltered communication link to and from the principals if the original purpose is still intended. If the purposes have changed, the intent and expectations for both forums should be clearly communicated to and discussed with the principals.
4. Several principals suggested that the current span of control, in which 202 principals purportedly report directly to the superintendent, may not be the most effective governance model. In that regard, I recommend that the district consider reexamining its governance structure to ensure that the current span of control provides the superintendent with an appropriate level of decision-making information and holds principals to an appropriate level of accountability.

Implications for Practice

Several implications for practice particularly related to communication processes and organizational structures can be extracted from the findings of this study. For example, the principals in this study who worked within a theoretically flattened governance structure clearly articulated their expectations for district communication processes within that context. Their responses and the recommendations that arose from them provide the district under study, and any district that is contemplating a move to a

flattened governance structure, with a very specific set of expectations for communication processes.

With respect to school district communications specifically, the literature on schools and school districts frequently acknowledged the critical role of communications in all aspects of education, whether at the philosophical or administrative level or in the classroom. Yet, in spite of this recognition, little research that has isolated and examined the role of communication within an educational context has been conducted. Even less research on this topic has been situated within the context of a flattened school governance structure. In that regard, I believe that the findings and conclusions of this study not only provide specific implications for practice, but also heighten the need to conduct more concentrated research in this area.

Recommendations for Research

In this study I examined the satisfaction levels of principals with a communication structure designed to operate within a theoretically flattened governance structure. By design, I restricted the distribution of questionnaires and conduct of interviews solely to serving principals. I believe that the data that I collected and analyzed foster a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding this very important link in school district communication processes. As I previously acknowledged, a substantial literature review of the research in this area clearly indicates the need for more focused research. The recommendations for that research are as follows:

1. I limited this study to the perceptions of serving principals who were both senders and receivers in the communication link between them and the superintendent. To more fully understand the complexities of communicating

within this structure, I recommend that additional research on superintendents' perceptions of this particular area be conducted.

2. I conducted this study within a large-scale purportedly flattened governance structure and involved principals who perceived themselves as being in a direct supervisory and communication link to the superintendent. I recommend replication of this study within a more traditional district governance structure to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the essential elements of effective communications between superintendents and principals generally.
3. I restricted this study to principals' perceptions of satisfaction with the communication link between them and the superintendent. Several participants suggested that other levels of district governance also had an influence on district communications. I recommend that the study be expanded to include a wider examination of factors that may influence principals' perceptions of satisfaction with district communications such as the expectations of site-based administrators, the superintendent's leadership style, and the school board's influence.
4. Individual characteristics influence satisfaction levels. For example, an extensive meta-analysis of research on role conflict and ambiguity suggested that individual perceptions of locus of control are associated with issues of role ambiguity (Jackson & Schuler, 1985). I recommend that future research be conducted on the effects of site-based management compared to more centralized governance as moderators of satisfaction levels to foster a better

understanding of the issues related to school district communication processes.

Implications for Research

Laying the philosophical groundwork for my research can descriptively be compared to the process of a *bricoleur*'s putting together a jigsaw puzzle. A *bricoleur*, according to Levi Strauss (1966), is a "jack of all trades or a kind of professional do-it-yourself person" (p. 17). The *bricoleur* produces a *bricolage*; that is, a pieced-together, close-knit set of practices that offer solutions to a problem in a concrete situation (p. 17). In the beginning the puzzle looks like a jumbled mess, but as the pieces start to fall into place, a picture begins to emerge. This description very graphically illustrates the process whereby this dissertation came into being.

Within that context, I believe that this study contributes to our understanding of the role of communications within a school district's purportedly flattened governance structure, particularly with regard to the communication link between superintendents and principals that operates within a flattened governance structure. However, it should be viewed as the starting point for a more in-depth study of communications within the educational context generally because there appears to be a lack of comprehensive research in this area. The review of the literature that I undertook prior to and during the study did not identify any in-depth research that specifically isolated and examined communication at this level, regardless of the governance structure. I believe that the availability of more comparative research would have enhanced this study. Although I acknowledge that significantly more study is required, I also believe that this study is a good starting point for future research examining school district communication structures and processes.

Personal Reflections

My decision to study communications within the context of a purportedly flattened organizational structure became more relevant as the study progressed through the various stages. Initially, it was born of a desire to determine how effective the communication media are that are designed specifically to operate within this context.

As the study proceeded through the various stages, this context broadened as I gained a greater understanding of the important role of organizational communication structures specifically and organizational structures generally in terms of the overall achievement of a district's stated goals and mandates. Clearly, the relationship between organizational structures and organizational communications is symbiotic, with each substantially influencing the effectiveness of the other.

My placement as a researcher in the district, coupled with the significant district changes during the research period, presented some personal challenges. In the role of immersed researcher, I had first-hand exposure to and participated in discussions on the district communication structure. In that capacity, it was interesting to observe the many influences that impact decisions on proposed changes to a district's communication strategy. At times I felt compelled to act on the insights that I was gathering in my study, yet I was also constrained by the strong culture of a district built on the principles of decentralized decision making. In that regard, balancing the role of researcher with practitioner and determining where it was appropriate to offer advice based on the data that I collected and my understandings from the literature were difficult at times.

However, where appropriate and relevant to the discussions specifically on governance and district communications, I shared information from the study at a variety of levels throughout the organization, which I believe has influenced principals'

perceptions of district communications. However, I have not measured the significance of that influence in this study.

As this study comes to an end, a number of significant changes have occurred in the district. A new superintendent, selected internally, was appointed at the end of the 2006–2007 school year. Subsequent to the appointment, a number of significant changes were made to the district governance structure. The most significant was the elimination of the executive director role, followed by the appointment of assistant superintendents. The newly appointed assistant superintendents, in addition to assuming some central office responsibilities, were also assigned direct school supervisory responsibilities. Additionally, an announcement was made that the district's media processes will also be undergoing significant changes. Because I had already collected the data when the changes were implemented or announced, I have not captured the impact of those changes in this study. I therefore believe that the study sets the stage for a very interesting and informative comparative study, or an extension of the study, in the same location.

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APPENDIX A:

PRINCIPALS' COMMUNICATION SATISFACTION SURVEY:

REPORTING AND COMMUNICATION STRUCTURE OF EPS

Instructions:

1. Answer all questions according to the directions provided.
2. Place completed survey in the self-addressed envelope labeled: **Reporting and Communication Satisfaction Survey**.

1. Please mail the envelope prior to June 1, 2005.

If you are interested in participating in Part II (Interview) of this study, please complete the volunteer information form and place it in the separate white envelope, and include it in the brown return envelope.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculties of Education and Extension Research Ethics Board (EE REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of EE REB at (780) 492-3751.

Lorne E. Parker, Doctoral Candidate
lorneparker@shaw.ca
432-0684 (Residence)
720-2881 (Cell)

Dr. Frank Peters, Supervisor
frank.peters@ualberta.ca
University of Alberta
492-7607

1. Respondent Demographic Data:

Gender:
Male ____
Female____

Age Category:
25–35 ____
36–45 ____
46+ ____

Current Assignment: Level(s) (specify division)
K–6 ____ K–9 ____
7–9 ____ 10–12 ____
Other ____

Were you ever a principal in another district?
Yes___ (# Yrs) ____
No ___

Number of years experience as a principal?
In 1st Year ____
1–5 Years ____
6–10 Years ____
10+ Years ____

Total Years in Administration
1–5 Years ____
6–10 Years ____
10+ Years ____

2. Communication:

How frequently do you communicate directly with the superintendent?

Weekly ____
Bi-Weekly ____
Monthly ____
Rarely ____

How frequently do you use the following forms of communication to communicate directly with the superintendent?

	Rarely				**Frequently**
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Telephone	1	2	3	4	5
E-mail	1	2	3	4	5
Fax Transmission	1	2	3	4	5
Personal Visit	1	2	3	4	5
Other	1	2	3	4	5

How frequently has the superintendent used the following forms of communication to communicate directly with you during the past school year?

	Rarely				**Frequently**
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Telephone	1	2	3	4	5
E-mail	1	2	3	4	5
Fax Transmission	1	2	3	4	5
Personal Visit	1	2	3	4	5
Other	1	2	3	4	5

In response to queries initiated by you, how satisfied are you with the method of response from the superintendent?

Dissatisfied		**Satisfied**		**Very Satisfied**
1	2	3	4	5

In response to queries initiated by you, how satisfied are you with the timeliness of response from the superintendent?

Dissatisfied		**Satisfied**		**Very Satisfied**
1	2	3	4	5

Given your knowledge of governance structures in other districts, how effective do you believe the EPSB communication structure is in comparison to the more traditional lines of communication found in other similar-sized districts (e.g. principals reporting to the superintendent through an associate superintendent)?

Ineffective		**Effective**		**Very Effective**
1	2	3	4	5

Given that you are a member of senior staff, how easy is it for you to communicate directly with the superintendent?

Difficult		**Accessible**		**Readily Accessible**
1	2	3	4	5

In terms of supporting your work at the school level, how effective is the communication link between you and the superintendent?

Ineffective		**Effective**		**Very Effective**
1	2	3	4	5

How effectively does the current communication structure inform the superintendent about issues/events involving your particular school?

Ineffective		**Effective**		**Very Effective**
1	2	3	4	5

How satisfied are you with the number of opportunities provided which allow you to have direct input into district policy making decisions?

Dissatisfied		**Satisfied**		**Very Satisfied**
1	2	3	4	5

How satisfied are you with your ability to be open in your communications with the superintendent?

Dissatisfied		**Satisfied**		**Very Satisfied**
1	2	3	4	5

How satisfied are you with your ability to provide input into district decision-making through your representative on Superintendent's Council?

Dissatisfied		**Satisfied**		**Very Satisfied**
1	2	3	4	5

To what degree has direct access to the superintendent assisted you in carrying out your role as an instructional leader?

Low Degree		**Moderate Degree**		**High Degree**
1	2	3	4	5

To what degree has direct access to the superintendent assisted you in carrying out your role as a site-based administrator?

Low Degree		**Moderate Degree**		**High Degree**
1	2	3	4	5

Has the appointment of assistants to the superintendent improved communication between you and the superintendent's office? Yes ____ No ____

If yes, to what degree has the appointment of the assistants to the superintendent improved communication between you and the superintendent's office?

Low Degree		**Moderate Degree**		**High Degree**
1	2	3	4	5

3. **Open Ended Questions:**

List the most positive aspects of the current communication structure.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

As a member of senior staff, what suggestions do you have to improve the communication structure in EPSB?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Other observations/recommendations:

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

APPENDIX B:

EXTENDED INTERVIEW QUESTION GUIDE

1. At what division level are you currently assigned?
2. How long have you been in this assignment?
3. Is this your first assignment as a principal? If no, describe your other assignments? Division? Length of time in each assignment? Jurisdiction other than Edmonton Public Schools?
4. Describe your administrative position in relation to overall district governance.
5. Specifically, describe:
    a. Your understanding of what it means to be identified as a member of the senior leadership team in Edmonton Public Schools.
    b. Your understanding of the role of senior staff, excluding the superintendent, in relation to the overall governance structure of Edmonton Public School District?
6. Given Edmonton Public's unique governance structure, with principals reporting directly to the superintendent, how often do you communicate with the superintendent and in what form (i.e., e-mail, telephone call, personal visits)?
7. Please give me an example of the types of things that would require you to communicate directly with the superintendent.
8. Which forms of communication does the superintendent use to communicate with principals?
    a. How effective (i.e., message is clear and timely, allows for feedback, etc.) do you find each of the structures?
    b. In your opinion, what is the most effective structure currently in use? Why do you consider it to be the most effective?
    c. In your opinion, what is the most ineffective method of communication currently in use in Edmonton Public School District? Why do you consider it to be the most ineffective method?
9. Given the fact that you are a member of the senior leadership team, how satisfied are you with the current structures of communication in Edmonton Public School District? Very Satisfied? Satisfied? Dissatisfied? What are the factors or issues that caused you to categorize your response in the manner selected?
10. What recommendations, if any, do you have to improve the communication structure in Edmonton Public School District?

APPENDIX C:

COVER LETTER: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Dear Colleague:

As many of you are aware, I am currently completing a doctoral degree in Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. As required by the degree program, I am in the process of completing dissertational research in the area of school governance. More specifically, I am examining satisfaction levels of the reporting and communication structures currently in place in Edmonton Public School District.

It is with a great deal of interest that I have observed district/government interactions over the past year. These interactions became even more interesting when Alberta Learning (2003) made the decision to examine EPS finances through the conduct of an audit/review. One of the recommendations from Alberta Learning, in the report of that audit, referred to the current reporting structure of EPS.

In light of some of the comments made by Alberta Learning, I am studying the effectiveness of the current reporting and communication structure of Edmonton Public School District, introduced in the mid '90s as a result of the provincial restructuring in education. Given the flattened organizational governance structure of Edmonton Public School District, the overall purpose of the research project will be to:

1. Determine how satisfied principals in Edmonton Public School District are with the communication structure between the schools and central office; and,

2. Determine whether or not modifications might be incorporated to make the system even more effective.

Given the heightened awareness of organizational communication generally, it is my belief this study is timely and will contribute to the body of knowledge. An examination of the literature does not indicate that a study in this particular area has been conducted. You, in your role as a senior administrator in Edmonton Public School District, are in the best position to accurately describe the effectiveness of the current system and make suggestions for its improvement.

Should you be willing to participate in the interview portion of the study, please complete and return the attached demographic questionnaire and research consent form in the separate white envelope. In order to maintain confidentiality of questionnaire principals, the unopened white envelopes will be separated out and given to an independent third party for recording. Your signature on the consent form indicates that you have read the information provided above and have given me permission to include you in the study.

All information obtained will be held in complete confidence. You may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Please contact me at your convenience should you require further information or clarification. Thank you for considering this request to participate in my research project.

Sincerely,

Lorne E. Parker
(780) 432-0684
lorneparker@shaw.ca

Dr. Frank Peters, Supervisor
492-7607; frank.peters@ualberta.ca

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculties of Education and Extension Research Ethics Board (EE REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of EE REB at (780) 492-3751.

APPENDIX D:

CONSENT FORM

I, _____, hereby consent to be interviewed and taped-recorded by Lorne Parker during my participation in the research project.

I understand that:

I may withdraw from the research at any time without penalty;

All information gathered will be treated confidentially;

Any information that identifies me will be destroyed upon completion of this research;

I will not be identifiable in any documents resulting from this research;

I also understand that the results of this research will be used only in the following:

Research Thesis

Presentations and written articles for other educators

_____ _____

Signature Date

_____

Contact Information

For further information concerning the completion of this form, please contact Lorne Parker by telephone at 432-0684 or e-mail at lorneparker@shaw.ca or Dr. Frank Peters, University of Alberta, Faculty of Education at 492-7607 (frank.peters@ualberta.ca).

APPENDIX E:

QUESTIONNAIRE FREQUENCY OF RESPONSE TABLES

Communication

How frequently do you communicate with the superintendent?

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	Weekly	2	1.9	1.9
	Bi-weekly	6	5.8	7.8
	Monthly	25	24.0	32.0
	Rarely	70	67.3	100.0
	Total	103	99.0	
	No response	1	1.0	
	Total	104	100.0	

How frequently do you use the following forms of communication to communicate directly with the superintendent?

E-mail

Rarely (1) to Frequently (5)		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	Rarely	21	20.2	20.2
	2	34	32.7	52.9
	3	31	29.8	82.7
	4	11	10.6	93.3
	Frequently	7	6.7	100.0
	Total	104	100.0	

Fax Transmission

Rarely (1) to Frequently (5)		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	No response	15	14.4	14.4
	Rarely	72	69.2	83.7
	2	8	7.7	91.3
	3	5	4.8	96.2
	4	4	3.8	100.0
	Total	104	100.0	

Personal Visit

Rarely (1) to Frequently (5)		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	Rarely	60	57.7	57.7
	2	33	31.7	89.4
	3	9	8.7	98.1
	4	2	1.9	100.0
	Total	104	100.0	

Other

Rarely (1) to Frequently (5)		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	No response	43	41.3	41.3
	Rarely	50	48.1	89.4
	2	2	1.9	91.3
	3	1	1.0	92.3
	4	4	3.8	96.2
	Frequently	4	3.8	100.0
	Total	104	100.0	

How frequently has the superintendent used the following forms of communication to communicate with you during the past school year?

Telephone

Rarely (1) to Frequently (5)		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	No response	5	4.8	4.8
	Rarely	65	62.5	67.3
	2	26	25.0	92.3
	3	5	4.8	97.1
	4	2	1.9	99.0
	Frequently	1	1.0	100.0
	Total	104	100.0	

E-mail

Rarely (1) to Frequently (5)		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	No response	2	1.9	1.9
	Rarely	23	22.1	24.0
	2	34	32.7	56.7
	3	17	16.3	73.1
	4	12	11.5	84.6
	Frequently	16	15.4	100.0
	Total	104	100.0	

Fax Transmission

Rarely (1) to Frequently (5)		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	No response	14	13.5	13.5
	Rarely	78	75.0	88.5
	2	7	6.7	95.2
	4	3	2.9	98.1
	Frequently	2	1.9	100.0
	Total	104	100.0	

Personal Visit

Rarely (1) to Frequently (5)		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	No response	3	2.9	2.9
	Rarely	63	60.6	63.5
	2	31	29.8	93.3
	3	7	6.7	100.0
	Total	104	100.0	

Other

Rarely (1) to Frequently (5)		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	No response	39	37.5	37.5
	Rarely	47	45.2	82.7
	2	6	5.8	88.5
	3	4	3.8	92.3
	4	2	1.9	94.2
	Frequently	6	5.8	100.0
	Total	104	100.0	

In response to queries initiated by you, how satisfied are you with the method of response from the superintendent?

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	No response	1	1.0	1.0
	Dissatisfied	15	14.4	15.4
	2	9	8.7	24.0
	Satisfied	36	34.6	58.7
	4	19	18.3	76.9
	Very satisfied	24	23.1	100.0
	Total	104	100.0	

In response to queries initiated by you, how satisfied are you with the timeliness of response from the superintendent?

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	no response	1	1.0	1.0
	Dissatisfied	6	5.8	6.7
	2	8	7.7	14.4
	Satisfied	34	32.7	47.1
	4	25	24.0	71.2
	Very satisfied	30	28.8	100.0
	Total	104	100.0	

Given your knowledge of governance structures in other districts, how effective do you believe the EPSB communication structure is in comparison to the more traditional lines of communication found in other similar-sized districts (e.g. principals reporting to the superintendent through an associate superintendent)?

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	no response	3	2.9	2.9
	Ineffective	15	14.4	17.3
	2	19	18.3	35.6
	Effective	27	26.0	61.5
	4	29	27.9	89.4
	Very effective	11	10.6	100.0
	Total	104	100.0	

Given that you are a member of senior staff, how easy is it for you to communicate directly with the superintendent?

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	no response	1	1.0	1.0
	Difficult	10	9.6	10.6
	2	15	14.4	25.0
	Accessible	30	28.8	53.8
	4	25	24.0	77.9
	Readily accessible	23	22.1	100.0
	Total	104	100.0	

In terms of supporting your work at the school level, how effective is the communication link between you and the superintendent?

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	Ineffective	11	10.6	10.6
	2	17	16.3	26.9
	Effective	40	38.5	65.4
	4	21	20.2	85.6
	Very effective	15	14.4	100.0
	Total	104	100.0	

How effectively does the current communication structure inform the superintendent about issues/events involving your particular school?

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	No response	1	1.0	1.0
	Ineffective	16	15.4	16.3
	2	29	27.9	44.2
	Effective	31	29.8	74.0
	4	18	17.3	91.3
	Very effective	9	8.7	100.0
	Total	104	100.0	

How satisfied are you with the number of opportunities provided which allow you to have direct input into district policy making decisions?

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	Dissatisfied	17	16.3	16.3
	2	31	29.8	46.2
	Satisfied	36	34.6	80.8
	4	12	11.5	92.3
	Very satisfied	8	7.7	100.0
	Total	104	100.0	

How satisfied are you with your ability to be open in your communications with the superintendent?

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	No response	1	1.0	1.0
	Dissatisfied	11	10.6	11.5
	2	19	18.3	29.8
	Satisfied	21	20.2	50.0
	4	31	29.8	79.8
	Very satisfied	21	20.2	100.0
	Total	104	100.0	

How satisfied are you with your ability to provide input into district decision-making through your representative on Superintendent's Council?

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	No response	2	1.9	1.9
	Dissatisfied	6	5.8	7.7
	2	19	18.3	26.0
	Satisfied	28	26.9	52.9
	4	31	29.8	82.7
	Very satisfied	18	17.3	100.0
	Total	104	100.0	

To what degree has direct access to the superintendent assisted you in carrying out your role as an instructional leader?

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	No response	1	1.0	1.0
	Low	19	18.3	19.2
	2	27	26.0	45.2
	Moderate	20	19.2	64.4
	4	27	26.0	90.4
	High	10	9.6	100.0
	Total	104	100.0	

To what degree has direct access to the superintendent assisted you in carrying out your role as a site-based administrator?

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	No response	1	1.0	1.0
	Low	18	17.3	18.3
	2	21	20.2	38.5
	Moderate	28	26.9	65.4
	4	24	23.1	88.5
	High	12	11.5	100.0
	Total	104	100.0	

Has the appointment of assistants to the superintendent improved communication between you and the superintendent's office? Yes ____ No ____

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	Yes	35	33.65	33.65
	No	66	63.46	97.11
	No Response	3	2.89	100
	Total	104	100	

If yes, to what degree has the appointment of the assistants to the superintendent improved communication between you and the superintendent's office?

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Valid	No response	53	51.0	51.0
	low	10	9.6	60.6
	2	7	6.7	67.3
	Moderate	14	13.5	80.8
	4	13	12.5	93.3
	High	7	6.7	100.0
	Total	104	100.0	